When Fear Masquerades as Wisdom: Psychedelics, Power, and the Courage to Think Deeply

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There is something in us, especially within certain cultural and religious communities, that reflexively shuts the door on unfamiliar ideas. We do not always examine them carefully. We do not sit with them long enough to understand them. Instead, we label them, often quickly, sometimes confidently, and then we move on, reassured by our own certainty. At times, that instinct protects us. But at other times, it is not wisdom at all. It is fear, dressed up in moral language, quietly masquerading as discernment.

A moment worth pausing for.

The current conversation surrounding psychedelics has once again forced its way into the public square, and not from the margins this time, but from the center of power. With President Donald Trump's recent executive order aimed at accelerating research into psychedelic-assisted therapies for depression, PTSD, anxiety, and other severe psychiatric conditions, what was once dismissed as fringe has now been formally invited back into the realm of legitimate medical inquiry. The order seeks to fast-track clinical trials, reduce regulatory barriers, and allocate meaningful federal

resources toward understanding compounds such as psilocybin, MDMA, LSD, and ibogaine, particularly in populations like veterans who have not responded to conventional treatments.

That alone should give us pause, not because it proves anything, but because it demands that we think more carefully than we have in the past.

We have to think more deeply.

If we are going to think carefully, we have to move beyond caricatures and into mechanisms, and even a bit of history.

A Swiss chemist, Albert Hofmann, riding his bicycle through Basel after synthesizing LSD-25, inadvertently opened a door into human consciousness that we still do not fully understand. It was not rebellion. It was discovery. What followed, however, was not simply science. It was cultural explosion, misuse, and eventually backlash. Timothy Leary, a psychologist from my own profession, famously took what might have been a promising scientific frontier and drove it into the ground with reckless cultural advocacy, essentially inviting indiscriminate use. The image of Leary in a tie-dye shirt urging people to "turn on and tune in" is not just a cultural artifact. It is a cautionary tale.

And yet, rejecting that era does not justify rejecting the entire domain.

So what is actually happening?

If we are going to be intellectually honest, we have to ask what these substances actually do in the brain.

At the center of that discussion is the brain's default mode network, a system that helps organize our sense of self, maintain continuity, and run the countless subroutines that make life predictable. It allows us to move through the world efficiently, to rely on learned patterns, to anticipate outcomes, and to function without having to consciously process every detail of every moment. It is, in many ways, a gift.

But what serves us well can also imprison us.

In conditions like depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and trauma, the default mode network can become rigid and overactive. It reinforces negative core beliefs about the self. It rehearses shame-based narratives. It traps individuals in loops of rumination that feel inescapable. The brain becomes predictable in the worst possible way, locked into patterns that no longer serve life but instead constrict it.

And this is where something shifts.

Psychedelics appear to temporarily loosen that grip.

Through strong serotonergic activation, particularly at the 5-HT2A receptor sites, these compounds disrupt the usual top-down control of the brain. The hierarchy of the brain's organization softens.

Regions that do not typically communicate begin to do so. Functional connectivity increases in ways that are rarely seen under ordinary conditions. The brain becomes less constrained by its habitual pathways and more globally integrated.

This is not simply about altered visuals or sensory distortions. The deeper phenomenon is that the brain, for a period of time, becomes more flexible. Cortical networks light up in novel configurations. Emotional material that has been locked within rigid interpretive frameworks can emerge into awareness with a different quality, one less fused with shame and more open to observation and insight. Patterns that have been rehearsed for years can, even briefly, loosen their hold.

For someone trapped in severe depression, that can mean experiencing a different relationship to the self for the first time in years. For someone with obsessive compulsive disorder, it can interrupt the relentless loop of intrusive thoughts and compulsions. For someone facing overwhelming fear of death, it can allow that fear to be encountered from a vantage point that is less constricted and more expansive.

None of this should be romanticized.

The same mechanisms that allow for insight can also produce anxiety, disorientation, or psychological destabilization, particularly in individuals who are not properly screened or supported. Certain compounds carry physiological risks as well. These are not benign substances. They are powerful tools, and like any powerful tool, they require careful handling.

This is not the same conversation.

Which brings us back to why the current moment matters.

What is being proposed is not a cultural free-for-all. It is not Timothy Leary in a tie-dye shirt inviting chaos. It is medically supervised, carefully screened, protocol-driven application within a clinical framework. Preparation. Administration. Integration. Thoughtful discernment about who is and is not an appropriate candidate.

That is an entirely different conversation.

And yet, even in the face of that distinction, resistance emerges quickly.

Connection still sits underneath all of this.

At this point, it is worth bringing in Johann Hari, whose work in Chasing the Scream reframed the conversation around addiction in a way that is deeply relevant here. His argument that the opposite of addiction is not simply sobriety, but connection speaks to something far deeper than substance use. It speaks to the human need for meaning, relationship, and integration. Psychedelic research, at its best, appears to touch that same domain, not by manufacturing connection, but by disrupting the rigid patterns that prevent people from experiencing it.

Faith has to wrestle honestly.

Christians, in particular, need to wrestle with this honestly. There is a long-standing tendency to equate altered states of consciousness with moral danger. Some of that caution is warranted. There has been misuse. There has been confusion between altered experience and genuine transformation. But there has also been a tendency to shut down inquiry prematurely.

History reminds us that this reflex is not always aligned with truth. Galileo challenged the prevailing understanding of the cosmos and found himself under house arrest for it. The idea that the earth was not the center of everything was once considered dangerous. It turned out to be correct.

Now, no, psychedelics are not heliocentrism. Let us not be ridiculous. But the pattern is worth noticing.

The current system is not perfect either.

At the same time, we must not pretend that the current system is without its own limitations. The modern psychotropic landscape is deeply flawed. Medications are often used long-term, sometimes indefinitely, and while they can provide meaningful stabilization, they do not always produce deep transformation. In some cases, they create a kind of maintenance loop rather than a pathway to healing.

This is where a deeper lens becomes relevant.

The psychologist Andrzej Łobaczewski described what he called political ponerology, the study of how distortion and even evil can operate within systems when power, incentives, and human fallibility begin to shift institutions away from their original purpose. Later thinkers, such as Professor Michael Rectenwald, have extended this framework beyond political systems into corporate, economic, and organizational life, examining how power consolidates, how incentives shape behavior, and how systems can drift from serving people to sustaining themselves.

That matters here because both sides of this conversation are vulnerable.

Psychedelics, if rushed or irresponsibly advanced, carry the real risk of becoming yet another domain shaped by profit, ideology, or premature certainty. History has shown that when powerful interventions outpace careful wisdom, the consequences can be significant, particularly for those already vulnerable.

At the same time, it would be equally naïve to ignore the realities of the existing psychopharmacological landscape. Many current treatment models are embedded within systems of financial incentive and institutional momentum that, often unintentionally, favor long-term management over genuine transformation. In some cases, this can lead to patterns that sustain dependence rather than resolve underlying suffering.

This creates a paradox. Psychedelics may offer the possibility of profound, time-limited interventions, experiences that, when used appropriately, do not lend themselves to ongoing consumption models. And precisely because of that, they may encounter resistance within systems that are not structurally aligned with one-time or infrequent treatments.

Neither of these realities should be dismissed. One warns of reckless acceleration driven by greed or cultural enthusiasm. The other points to the quiet inertia of established systems that may resist disruption, even when change is warranted.

Wisdom requires that we hold both tensions at once.

So we walk a narrow path.

Between them lies a narrow path.

A path of rigorous research. A path of careful screening. A path of humility in both innovation and restraint.

The question is not whether psychedelics are good or bad in some simplistic sense. The question is whether we have the courage to approach them with both caution and curiosity, to study them deeply, to regulate them wisely, and to apply them carefully in cases where suffering has not yielded to other interventions.

Because for those whose lives are being dismantled by severe, intractable depression, by obsessive compulsive disorder, or by overwhelming existential fear, this is not an abstract debate.

It is a call.

What emerges from all of this is not a simplistic endorsement or rejection, but a call to think more deeply, to resist both fear and recklessness, and to pursue truth wherever it leads with humility and courage. The question is not simply whether psychedelics are dangerous or promising, but whether we are willing to engage complex realities with discernment rather than reflex.

For those grounded in faith, this is not a retreat from conviction, but an expression of it. Discernment is not rooted in fear of the unknown, but in alignment with Truth itself. Christ did not call us into avoidance, but into clarity, courage, and love of what is real. If something is false, it should be exposed. If something is dangerous, it should be named. But if something holds genuine potential to relieve suffering, it should not be dismissed simply because it challenges what is familiar.

Real healing rarely comes through stagnation. It requires thoughtful, prayerful engagement with the unknown—not careless risk, but courageous willingness to wrestle honestly with what we do not yet fully understand. Anything less may appear wise, but in reality, it is often avoidance.

"Test everything; hold fast what is good." 1 Thessalonians 5:21