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Narrative hermeneutics and bioethics: Understanding the psychedelic value changes

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The use of psychedelics has recently gained increased interest among bioethicists, as the articles published in this journal attest. Some of the recent scholarship suggests that psychedelic experiences may help individuals reconnect to their values and alter personal values and identity (Kähönen 2023). We propose that narrative hermeneutics may offer valuable tools for assisting meaning-making and reducing the ethical risks associated with such value changes, including those arising in psychedelic-assisted therapy. We therefore apply narrative hermeneutics in the context of psychedelic value changes to enrich the bioethical debate.

Value changes are ethically significant phenomena, as personal values are cognitive structures at the core of an individual's identity, guiding attitudes, life choices, and behavior by conveying what is important. Values are generally relatively stable in adults, so it follows that observed psychedelic value changes deserve attention. Value-laden insights and moral realizations during psychedelic experiences often foster self-transcendent values (Kähönen 2023; 2024). Notably, psychedelics may serve as tools for promoting value learning with the potential to enhance prosociality, empathy, and environmental concern (Kähönen 2024).

Psychedelic value changes have been linked to self-transcendent experiences, such as mystical states, ego-dissolutions, awe, and a sense of connectedness, and to associated changes in selfhood, affect, and attribution of salience and attention (Kähönen 2023). However, these momentary altered states do not automatically lead to lasting selfless conduct or desirable value changes. The process is complex and context-sensitive, with reported directions of value changes

varying widely, including, for example, cases of political radicalization in various directions (Pace and Devenot 2021).

A plausible hypothesis is the contextualist view: both the experiences and long-term value changes associated with psychedelics are pivotally shaped by contextual factors, including the cultural setting and the individual's prior worldviews and values (cf. Dupuis 2022). In line with these observations, Kähönen (2024) offers a nuanced, context-sensitive analysis of psychedelic value changes, arguing that they consist of transient, value-manifesting epiphanies that intertwine with an individual's long-term aspirations in a context-dependent way. Prior values and aspirations, embedded in a cultural context, shape these epiphanies, which then influence aspirations post-experience. Depending on the experiences, aspirations, and context, psychedelic epiphanies may reinforce or alter one's aspirational path.

If these contextualist views on psychedelic value changes are correct—as we think they are—they carry obvious ethical implications: the broader cultural context and available interpretive resources may be vital for the ethical outcomes of psychedelic experiences. This highlights the need to better understand and support the meaning-making processes associated with psychedelic experiences. We propose that perspectives offered by narrative hermeneutics could refine contextualist views on psychedelic value changes and offer concrete tools to support desirable post-experience value changes and aspirations, for example in clinical settings.

Narrative bioethics and narrative hermeneutics

To complement traditional bioethics, which largely focuses on abstract and impartial principles, advocates of the narrative approach argue for the importance of communication and storytelling in understanding moral lives (McCarthy 2003). Narrative ethics emphasizes the uniqueness and complexity of moral situations and individual perspectives. We propose that Meretoja's (2018) account of narrative hermeneutics offers an apt approach for developing narrative bioethics of psychedelic experiences.

According to Meretoja (2018), narrative hermeneutics is a constructionist perspective that explores the dynamic interplay between subjective experience and the various forms of narrative used to make sense of life. In this view, unfolding and recalled events are continually (re)interpreted through culturally embedded practices of meaning-making. Furthermore, narrative hermeneutics offers a nuanced way to understand and assess the ethical potential and risks of narrative meaning-making. This perspective emphasizes how narratives have ethically significant practical and social functions, as the weaving and crafting of narratives always both open and disclose possibilities for individual and collective action. In an empowering manner, this approach highlights the individual's capacity to take an active role in interpretation and use their narrative agency in relation to their values.

Here, our focus is on the process that reconstitutes the self through a socially embedded reinterpretation of experiences, or ‘rewriting of the self.’ We suggest that this model can provide a useful description of how accounts of ‘what was revealed’ during a psychedelic episode may refigure personal values and influence future experiences and potential courses of action.

Psychedelic experiences and value changes in the light of narrative hermeneutics

Through the narrative hermeneutics approach, we can appreciate and elucidate the importance of therapeutic, cultural, and autobiographical contexts in psychedelic value changes and other ethically relevant processes. First, narrative hermeneutics provides an elegant explanation for the indeterminacy and variation in the frequency and content of self-transcendent experiences, such as mystical experiences and ego dissolutions, and their long-term outcomes. From this perspective, psychedelic experiences are intimately shaped through various layers of meaning-making, centrally influenced by contextual factors, including the broader cultural environment and the individual’s background.

The model of double hermeneutics suggests that interpretative activities occur both during and after the acute psychedelic experience. Initial intuitive interpretations during the experience are later subjected to a second, reflective interpretation that seeks to place them within an individual's broader understanding of themselves and the world. Crucially, neither the psychedelic episodes themselves nor subsequent meaning-making efforts occur in a biographical or cultural vacuum. Instead, psychedelic experiences are always embedded in, interpreted, and made sense of through personal life narratives and the wider webs of meaning provided by the sociocultural context.

Second, psychedelic value changes can be approached as shifts in meaning-making, consisting at least partly of narrative hermeneutic processes. For instance, Irvine et al. (2023, 179) in their study of psychedelic-induced biophilia quote an individual: "The use of psychedelics has demonstrated that there is actually no real separation between humanity and the natural world and that our interconnectivity makes it absurd to exploit and damage any part of our environment." This illustrates how cultural meanings—here, concerning ‘humanity,’ the ‘natural world,’ and awareness of environmental destruction—serve as pivotal anchors for interpreting the meaning and implications of psychedelic experiences. Importantly, while psychedelic experiences are interpreted through these cultural meanings, these experiences can also hermeneutically transform or deepen a person’s understanding of those meanings—as in this case, the experience of interconnectedness rendered environmental exploitation as absurd. Subtle reorientations or radical shifts in ethical perspective, values, and life direction are not a passive outcome of the psychedelic state but involve active interpretive engagement by the individual to uncover the subjective meaning and practical significance of what is experienced.

The ethical significance of meaning-making and practical suggestions

The perspective of narrative hermeneutics can help articulate the ethical significance of the context surrounding psychedelic experiences. How self-transcendent experiences and epiphanies are understood and narrated can crucially affect the consequences of these experiences, either supporting or hindering individuals in meaningfully making sense of their realizations. There already exists some empirical support for the idea that changes in the narrative self are central to the transformations occurring after the experience, as individuals develop novel self-understandings based on the experiences (Amada & Shane 2022). Factors related to meaning-making could pivotally influence whether one's ethical horizons expand toward new possibilities and constructive value and behavior changes, or narrowed to a given dogmatic perspective. Further exploration is needed to understand how these processes of meaning-making and attribution unfold and how narrative and non-narrative aspects interact.

In addition to its theoretical utility for understanding the changes brought about by transformative psychedelic experiences, the narrative hermeneutic perspective underlines the need to provide support and resources for making sense of these experiences. Psychoactive substances that reliably reshape thinking patterns and often motivate behavior aligned with deeply held values could be seen as catalysts for ethically potent and transformative reinterpretations. Narrative hermeneutics, with the model it provides for assessing the ethical potential of narratives, offers a nuanced theoretical framework to evaluate and support these changes, for example by drawing attention to whether particular narratives expand or diminish one's sense of the possible and strengthen or impede one's self-understanding (see Meretoja 2018, chapter 3).

To facilitate desirable and sustained value changes among individuals using psychedelics, psychedelic therapists should consider providing appropriate interpretive resources and means for assessing emerging narratives for their ethical potential. This could involve prompting personal reflection as well as offering materials suitable for making sense of ethical and worldview-related themes, similar to recent proposals for aiding individuals in integrating metaphysical belief changes through philosophical counseling (Sjöstedt-Hughes 2023). Post-psychedelic exploration of narratives, perhaps drawing elements from narrative therapy, could support the search for meaningful, ethically sound and life-enriching moral and metaphysical understandings. These procedures for supporting constructive meaning-making are a pivotal ethical issue, particularly as psychedelics may sometimes lead to disruptive realizations described as 'ontological shock,' potentially resulting in a so-called crisis of meaning. A hermeneutic approach to the narrative interpretation of psychedelic experiences and value changes could assist in engaging with the ethical potential of both challenging and positive experiences in a dialogical and gentle manner, respecting individual autonomy as well as the diverse cultural backgrounds and worldviews of those undergoing psychedelic transformations (cf. Timmerman et al., 2022).

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