

Psychedelic Experience and the Aesthetics of Surrender

by

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B.A., University of Calgary, 2004

LL.B., University of Ottawa, 2008

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/ Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This dissertation uses a phenomenological approach to investigate the aesthetic value of psychedelic experience. Using a critical Merleau-Pontian approach, I surface ‘surrender’ as the performative task of psychedelic experience. I argue that to appreciate a psychedelic experience aesthetically, one undergoes the process of surrender. In other words, I highlight a specific kind of surrender that a person is called on to enact during a psychedelic experience. To account for the uniqueness of the psychedelic context, I develop philosopher Patočka’s notion of surrender and argue that the process of psychedelic surrender is what makes psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable. Ultimately, this project suggests that psychedelic experiences provide a unique opportunity to engage in an aesthetic experience, if aesthetic experience is understood broadly as experience that is valued for its own sake. By focusing on the aesthetic value of psychedelic experience, this dissertation departs from mainstream philosophical discourse on psychedelic experiences, which tends to emphasize the use of psychedelic drugs as therapeutic tools in medical contexts. The purpose of this dissertation is to show why psychedelic experiences are an especially powerful kind of aesthetic experience and are aesthetically valuable.

This dissertation proceeds as follows. In chapter 1, I provide a general overview of psychedelic drugs and academic discourse relating to psychedelic experiences. I focus on psychedelic drugs in psychology and also some of the main conversations around psychedelic experiences in current philosophical discourse. In chapter 2, I talk about psychedelic experiences and aesthetic experience and aesthetic value. Here, I highlight

why psychedelic experiences problematize current approaches to understanding aesthetic experience and aesthetic value. In chapter 3, I discuss embodied phenomenology. The purpose of chapter 3 is to provide the framework for tackling the question of whether psychedelic experiences are aesthetically valuable. In chapter 4, I use the embodied approach that I developed in chapter 3 to argue that psychedelic experiences are aesthetically valuable when a person surrenders. Here, I develop Patočka's notion of surrender to account for the uniqueness of the psychedelic context. I argue that 'psychedelic surrender' is the performative task of psychedelic experience. Ultimately, this project suggests that psychedelic experiences provide a unique opportunity to engage in an aesthetic experience, if aesthetic experience is understood broadly to be an experience that is valued for its own sake.

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Dedication

To Arlen.

Project Background and Motivation

I started this project with a broad question in mind: what is the aesthetic value of psychedelic experience (if any)? I was motivated to answer this question because a lot of philosophical discussion around psychedelic experience ignores their potential aesthetic value. For example, some philosophers discuss that certain psychedelic drugs are morally permissible when used in medical contexts (Greif & Šurkala, 2020), while others consider the implication of psychedelic experiences for the concepts of the 'self' (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). Recent discussions in phenomenology have expanded philosophical analysis to explore issues such as agency during psychedelic experience (McMillan et al., 2025), and psychedelic realism (Forde, 2025). However, many questions to do with the aesthetic nature of psychedelic experience remain. As such, I was motivated to address a gap in the literature that does not consider the aesthetic nature of psychedelic experiences.

Since I believe that psychedelic experiences might be a kind of aesthetic experience, I started the philosophical analysis in chapter 2 by looking at the nature of aesthetic experience. However, there is a lack of agreement around whether there are such things as 'aesthetic experiences,' so I decided to turn to phenomenology. In chapter 3, I explored a Merleau-Pontian approach to embodied phenomenology in order to assess the aesthetics of psychedelic experience. By the end of chapter 3, I realized that I still needed to find what it was that make psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable. In chapter 4 of this project, I surface surrender as the performative task of psychedelic experience. By psychedelic surrender, I mean relinquishing control in a particular

psychedelic context. Psychedelic surrender is an open concept, and it is not my intention to close it in or to identify or delineate the properties or sufficient or necessary conditions for psychedelic surrender. Instead, I surface psychedelic surrender as the performative task of the psychedelic experience that, when achieved, renders psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable.

When I started this project there was no direct thing that I was trying to prove. I knew I was taking a risk but I did not want to set out to prove something before I explored the nature of psychedelic experience as an experience that people commonly have. I found Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology to be well suited to exploring the aesthetics of psychedelic experience. The overarching value that informed the approach was a commitment to remaining open, to seeing what digging-in would unearth, and phenomenology allowed this to happen. While psychedelic experiences are cited as among the most meaningful experiences in a person's life (Griffiths et al., 2006), research also indicates that psychedelic experiences can be incredibly challenging (Johnstad, 2021). My intention is not to suggest that there are no risks to psychedelic experience, but rather, to look at the aesthetics of psychedelic experience as an experience that people have.

Ultimately, I surfaced surrender as the performative task of psychedelic experience. But, there are questions related to surrender that remain unanswered as they are outside the scope of this project. One is the apparent paradox wherein psychedelic surrender, as the relinquishing of control during psychedelic experience, is the condition through which greater freedom is possible. In other words, it seems that by letting go and relinquishing

control during a psychedelic experience, a person stands to be liberated during that experience and to have their agency expanded so that they can enjoy, for example, greater temporal freedom (McMillan et al., 2025). It appears that psychedelic surrender highlights a paradox wherein intentionally adopting a passive stance can result in expanded agency in some circumstances. More broadly, I believe that the value of passivity has maybe been overlooked in Western philosophy.

Surrender also connects to resisting accounts of freedom that put the responsibility on the individual to overcome states of consciousness that might be the result of trauma. To illustrate, as I explore in chapter 4 of this project, some theories of psychedelic experience and the self imply that consciousness might be a constraining fact of embodiment (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). But, if consciousness is a constraining fact of embodiment, then that implies that our freedom is limited by the structure of our consciousness. If our freedom is limited by the structure of consciousness, then perhaps we are less responsible if we are unable to change limiting patterns in our lives. Again, insofar as studies indicate that psychedelic experiences can be powerful therapeutic tools for treating various disorders related to “stuck” thinking, and, if surrender is an important aspect of obtaining therapeutic value from a psychedelic experience, then it seems again that surrender can be valuable.

Now that I have outlined what motivated me to start this project in the first place, I end this section by summarizing another primary motivation. A primary motivation was to expand philosophical discourse of psychedelic experiences to consider broader sets of values and to look at the aesthetics of psychedelic experience. Psychedelic surrender

highlights an approach to psychedelic experience that is embodied, which in turn suggests the possibility of expanded agency that is achieved through intentionally adopting a passive stance. More broadly, the analysis of psychedelic experience in this dissertation shows that the phenomenological method is sometimes better suited to surfacing values associated with certain kinds of experiences, including, in this case, the aesthetics of psychedelic experience.

Introduction

This dissertation applies an embodied phenomenological framework to psychedelic experiences and surfaces psychedelic surrender as the performative task of psychedelic experience. I suggest that to appreciate a psychedelic experience aesthetically, one surrenders. I use Merleau-Ponty's embodied theory of perception, as set out in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2012) as a starting point. I discuss what it means to have a "performative task" and how a focus on the process of surrender, as opposed to the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experience, explains why these experiences are aesthetically valuable. I anchor the project in philosophical inquiry into aesthetic experience, and suggest that a psychedelic experience has the potential to be an especially powerful kind of aesthetic experience. I argue that there is a kind of psychedelic surrender that a person is called on to perform during a psychedelic experience. If performed, psychedelic surrender renders psychedelic experience aesthetically valuable.

Before proceeding I pause here to clarify what I mean by the term 'surface.' In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'surface' not only to describe the tops of objects in the world, but also to highlight the coming into being of that which is, through the use of language. To illustrate, Merleau-Ponty states,

...that language-thing...brings to the surface all the deep-rooted relations of the lived experience wherein it takes form, and which is the language of life and of action but also that of literature and of poetry... (1968/1964, p. 126)

The above noted passage suggests that language surfaces, as in exposes, aspects of the lived experience. To ‘surface’ something, then, is to expose an aspect of the lived experience through the use of words. The term ‘surface’ as a verb is also suggested in the 2003 interview given by French philosopher Guy Petitdemange. In that interview, which was posted to Youtube in 2017, there is a placeholder image of an iceberg. The iceberg is chosen to highlight the relationship between the visible and invisible, the main topic of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in his book of the same name. As the interview with Petitdemange suggests, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology posits language as a means to surface that which is yet invisible. This relates to my project because I aim to the surface an aspect of psychedelic experience that is aesthetic in nature. As such, I use the term ‘surface’ as a verb throughout.

I take an embodied phenomenological approach to tackle the question: what makes psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable? Phenomenology conceives of perception as world directed. In other words, perception is always “of” something and does not “exist in a cabinet” on its own (Solowski, 1999, p. 12). Phenomenological approaches are generally concerned with identifying the forms of intending that correspond with various phenomena (Solowski, 1999). The phenomenological approach that I take is embodied, and I reject “...the illusion that we ourselves are not a part of the world that we study, that we can objectively stand apart from that world, as spectators, and can thus determine its workings from outside” (Abram, 1988). Instead, I propose to look at the aesthetics of psychedelic experience from an embodied perspective. Whereas conversations about psychedelic experiences often focus on their phenomenal contents (such as bright lights,

changing forms, etcetera), by taking an embodied approach I focus on something more internal to the experience itself. Specifically, I focus on a process-oriented account of surrender that is anchored in an embodied theory of perception.

This dissertation proceeds as follows. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of psychedelic drugs. Here, I outline how psychedelic drugs are classified in terms of their pharmacology, as well as some of the basic approaches taken to discussing psychedelic drugs and psychedelic experiences. I look at the long and ongoing relationship between psychedelic experiences and art, and highlight the relationship between psychedelic experience and art as an empirical fact of human history. I also briefly highlight some of the main issues with psychedelic experiences in psychology, and I discuss the use of psychedelic drugs as therapeutic tools. Finally, I look at some of the main philosophical issues to do with psychedelic drugs, including issues around classifying these kinds of experiences, as well as philosophical issues around the self that are triggered via study of psychedelic experience. I end the section by connecting psychedelic experience to other kinds of aesthetic experiences. Specifically, I explore some similarities between psychedelic experiences and the aesthetics of games.

In Chapter 2, I look at three broad approaches to aesthetic experience. First, I discuss the debate between externalists and internalists, both who focus on the properties of aesthetic experience. Whereas the internalists hold that aesthetic experiences have their own properties that are internal to them, externalists hold that there is no such thing as an aesthetic experience that has its own properties. Instead, according to externalists, we merely notice the aesthetic properties of objects when we say we have an aesthetic

experience. I then discuss frameworks that focus largely on cognition for the concept of aesthetic experience, such as evaluative conceptions of aesthetic experience. Evaluative approaches to aesthetic experience require acts of intellect to ascertain the value of a kind of experience in order to determine whether it is (or isn't) an aesthetic experience. Finally, I focus on a third way to approach aesthetic experience which focuses on the value of these kinds of experiences. These kinds of approaches start to look at the possibility that aesthetic experience can be defined minimally as any kind of experience that is valued for its own sake. Some of the value type approaches incorporate description in order to ascertain the kind of value associated with aesthetic experience. For example, Alan Carlson's approach to appreciation of the environment suggests that in order to appreciate something aesthetically, we must know "what" to appreciate and also "how to appreciate" (Carlson, 2000). I end the summary of each approach by flagging how psychedelic experiences complicate each approach to aesthetic experience. The purpose here is to connect psychedelic experience with already existing frameworks to approaching the aesthetic, via philosophical discourse around aesthetic experience.

In Chapter 3, I set out the framework that I use to look at psychedelic experiences. Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenological approach to perception suggests that meaning exists in the body before any conscious abstractions about the nature of our experience. This opens the possibility that our bodies are a primal source of meaning, before any conscious abstraction about meaningfulness or value. I develop the embodied phenomenological approach in Chapter 3 in order to use it in Chapter 4 in my analysis of psychedelic experience. As will be seen, many of the problems that psychedelics pose for

aesthetic experience dissolve when an embodied phenomenological approach is taken.

My overall goal is to provide a framework that will allow me to focus on describing psychedelic experience as a “thing in itself”.

In Chapter 4, I look at the aesthetics of psychedelic experience. Here, I modify philosopher Patočka’s account of surrender to account for the uniqueness of psychedelic experiences, and surface psychedelic surrender as the performative task of psychedelic experience. I discuss psychedelic experience as a unique kind of experience that involves absorption in a special psychedelic landscape. Psychedelic experiences are often notable for the uniqueness of their phenomenal contents. That is, psychedelic experiences seem special partly because of how they distort perception. Yet, what is often overlooked is that psychedelic experiences are also unique because they offer an opportunity to surrender – meaning to let go – that is distinctly aesthetic. By focusing on psychedelic surrender, I move away from discussing the phenomenal contents of these experiences to instead focus on the process that a person engages in when one lets go during a psychedelic experience. As will be discussed toward the end of the dissertation, psychedelic surrender exposes the possibility of a kind of surrender that is aesthetic in nature. By adopting an embodied approach that posits meaning as originating first in the body, psychedelic surrender emerges as an experience that is valued for its own sake, while acknowledging that it uniquely confers the possibility of convening with sources of meaning that lie in the body and are normally hidden from conscious perception.

Psychedelic experiences can be very challenging. Nothing in this project should be taken to imply that psychedelic drugs are safe or that taking them outside of medical contexts and under appropriate supervision is advisable.

Chapter 1: Psychedelics

1.1 Chapter 1 Introduction

In this first chapter of the dissertation, I provide a brief introduction to psychedelic drugs and psychedelic experience. I start with the pharmacological structure of psychedelic drugs. Here, I discuss the two main classifications of psychedelic drugs and provide some basic terminology for discussing psychedelic experiences. I then provide a brief overview of psychedelic drug use in ancient societies, and the relationship between art and psychedelics in some ancient societies. I then look at the continued influence that psychedelics have in modern art forms. I briefly discuss the emergence of the psychedelic movement in the 1960s, and how the psychedelic style of art tends to enact the very experience that it represents. I hint here, early on in the project, at some interesting philosophical issues to do with distinction between expression and recording of psychedelic experience in art. The purpose here is to highlight the persistent, ongoing relationship, between art and psychedelic drugs. Overall, evidence suggests that psychedelic drugs have been a part of human societies for a very, very, long time. Finally, I look at the use of psychedelic drugs as therapeutic tools during the 1960s, as well as the subsequent revolt against their proliferation, prior to their re-emergence as therapeutic tools post-2010. The final part of this first chapter summarizes some of the main related to psychedelics in philosophy. Here, I do a survey of some of the main areas that philosophers tend to discuss when looking at psychedelic experiences. For example, I discuss some philosophical issues around the epistemics of psychedelic experience,

psychedelics as moral enhancements, as well as psychedelics as creative expression. The purpose of this brief introduction is to give a survey of the field across the relevant areas.

1.2 Psychedelic drugs

Psychedelics can be separated into two main categories based on their pharmacology: the classic psychedelics and the non-classic psychedelics. All classic psychedelics work by activating serotonin 2A receptors (5-HT_{2A}) (Glennon et al., 1984). These classic psychedelics include magic mushrooms (psilocybin), LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), DMT (N-Dimethyltryptamine) and mescaline (Carhart-Harris et al., 2014). In addition to targeting the same serotonin receptors in the brain (5-HT_{2A}), the classic psychedelics all have active ingredients that are either found in nature or are close analogs of chemicals found in nature (Tupper et al., 2015). For example, the active ingredient in LSD is synthetically derived from ergot (a fungus) (Barker, 2018). Mescaline is a phenethylamine alkaloid that naturally occurs in the peyote and San Pedro cacti (Vamvakopoulou et al., 2023). The active ingredient in magic mushrooms is psilocybin, which is found naturally in various kinds of mushrooms. In addition to their relationship or derivation from elements in nature, the classic psychedelics can be found in various areas throughout the globe. Magic mushrooms grow in areas across the globe, including throughout the Americas (Strauss et al., 2023). DMT is an indole alkaloid that naturally occurs in various plants globally. Interestingly, DMT also occurs endogenously in animals and in the human brain, meaning that DMT is present (diffuse) throughout nature (i.e. in plants and in animals) (Barker, 2018). The non-classic psychedelics are more varied and include drugs such as ketamine, MDMA, ibogaine and salvia (Mendes et al., 2022). These non-classic psychedelics have

different pharmacological mechanisms, but like the classic psychedelics they cause significant alterations in perception and consciousness. Some of the non-classic psychedelics target serotonin receptors along with other receptors. For example, MDMA is a serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline agonist (Tupper et al., 2015).

Now that I have provided an overview of the main pharmacological mechanisms of psychedelic drugs, I move on to discuss basic terminology used to discuss psychedelic drugs and psychedelic experience in other contexts. Some basic terminology when discussing psychedelic drugs, which is also used in academic contexts, is 'set' and 'setting'. Psychedelic users often pay attention to set and setting when planning a psychedelic experience. Set refers to the personality and experiences of the psychedelic users and setting refers to elements in the external environment, such as music or lighting (Eisner, 1997). Betty Eisner talks about a third concept, Matrix (Eisner, 1997). Matrix incorporates elements even further out, specifically calling for consideration of the environment that the psychedelic user comes from, the environment in which they live at the time of the experience, and the environmental that they will return to once the session is over (Eisner, 1997). Set, Setting, and Matrix are important concepts that hint at the ongoing relationships between psychedelic drugs, which itself spans borders across tightly controlled medical contexts where it continues to be used as therapeutic tools, to the larger proliferation of psychedelic drugs and their use in society more generally.

Finally, while all psychedelics commonly bring about significant changes in cognition and perception (including hallucinations in some circumstances), scientists have not identified how exactly these drugs create those changes. According to Steven Barker,

“...we have yet to resolve the biochemical mechanisms by which hallucinogens (psychedelics) so dramatically alter perception and consciousness” (2018, p. 1). The mystery surrounding the mechanisms of psychedelic drugs persists despite the fact that psychedelics are “...the only class of compounds that efficiently and specifically...” alter consciousness and perception in the manner that they do (Barker, 2018, p. 1).

1.2.1. Difficult psychedelic experiences

Psychedelic experiences can be incredibly challenging. To illustrate, psychedelic experiences can include “unpleasant insights about one’s life,” social paranoia, and troubling visions (Johnstad, 2021). The experience of ego death, in which the person feels that the self is lost altogether, is another possibility and can be extremely difficult. For example, one user reported that they felt “crushed” out of existence (Johnstad, 2021). Moreover, newer research suggests that some of the negative effects of psychedelic experiences can persist long after the psychedelic experience is over (Evans et al., 2023). The long-lasting effects of negative psychedelic experiences can include feelings of anxiety and fear, social disconnection, existential struggle, depersonalization and derealization (Evans et al., 2023). Therefore, although many people cite psychedelic experiences as among the most meaningful experiences of their lives, there are also known risks, including the inducement of distress (Griffiths et al., 2006). As such, it is important to carefully consider whether such an experience is worth the known risks and to consult with a medical professional before taking psychedelic drugs for any reason.

1.3 Psychedelics and art

Some of the oldest archeological evidence of humans using psychoactive substances is cave art associated with mescaline use in 8600 BC in Peru (Samorini, 2019).

Archeologists have also discovered cave paintings featuring human figures holding mushrooms with "...dotted lines extended to the head" in Algeria between 6000 and 4500 BC (Samorini, 2019). Other early evidence of psychedelic mushroom use is rock art in Spain from circa 4000 BC, depicting neurotropic fungi that archeologists say supports an inference of prehistoric use of psychedelic mushrooms in the area (Akers et al., 2011).

Other evidence suggests that the Chukchi people, a group of people native to Siberia, used psychedelic fungi as far back as 1000 BC (Samorini, 2019). Evidence of peyote usage in the area around Texas suggests that humans used psychedelic substances in the Americas as early as 3200 BC (Samorini, 2019). Because fungi naturally decompose, archeological evidence of the use of magic mushrooms largely relies on cave paintings that support an inference that these drugs were used (as explained above in the example of the figure holding mushrooms with a dotted line extended to the head). Interestingly, with peyote, archeologists found peyote buttons that still contained active mescaline in New Mexico (Samorini, 2019). Archeologists were able to date those peyote buttons to 3200 BC (Samorini, 2019). Even more interesting is that the peyote buttons included crushed peyote cactus in addition to other plants, which suggests that the peyote drug was concocted intentionally (Samorini, 2019). Like with psychotropic mushrooms from the prehistoric period, evidence of peyote use is also supported with cave paintings depicting "themes related to the symbolic universe of the peyote" (Samorini, 2019, p. 71). Collectively, these

findings suggest that humans have used psychedelic drugs for thousands of years across various cultures.

Evidence also suggests that people in ancient human societies used psychedelic drugs as part of shamanic rituals (Strauss et al., 2023). Some social scientists suggest that the evolution of the human brain occurred with both psychedelic drugs and shamanic practices playing an intervening role (Winkelman, 2021). Both psychedelic drugs, and shamanic rituals, stimulate the same innate thought modules of self-awareness, other awareness, mind-reading and spatial and visual intelligences in the brain (Winkelman, 2021). At the same time, evidence of prehistoric psychedelic drug use – and shamanism – spans cultures and is an empirical fact of foraging societies. Therefore, some social scientists suggest that it is reasonable to think that psychedelic drugs and shamanism both impacted the evolution of the human psychology. According to Dr. Winkelman, “The co-evolution of shamanism and ritual ingestion of psilocybin-containing mushrooms shaped our evolutionary psychology” (Winkelman, 2021, p. 2).

Archeological evidence also suggests a relationship between psychedelics and art (Samorini, 1992). Some of the earliest cave art depicting ancient humans’ use of psychedelic substances includes the Tassili mushroom figures, discovered in Tassili, Algeria (Samorini, 1992). The Tassili mushroom figures include human looking beings with animal elements, adorned with mushrooms or otherwise engaged with mushrooms. The Tassili Mushroom Shaman is one such figure: he has a bee tail for a head and has mushrooms sprouting out of his body. Other mushroom figures from the same set of caves feature human like figures with abstract elements, such as spirals and circles where the

head would be. The incorporation of abstract elements indicates that these figures are not merely meant to record events but are also a form of self-expression (Samorini, 2019). As such, it seems reasonable to think that the relationship between psychedelic drugs and art is very old. In addition, the relationship between psychedelic drugs and art persists in modern society.

Starting in the 1960s, a new kind of psychedelic art emerged that demonstrates an obvious refusal to adhere to established conventions in various genres. Psychedelic music features loud and discordant melodies, which indicate a marked departure from more melodic approaches to music that tend to avoid discordance. An example is The Beatles song *Tomorrow Never Knows*, released in 1966. The song *Tomorrow Never Knows* features warping musical cords that mimic the disruptions in perception that are part of psychedelic experiences, along with studio techniques that make distortions sound psychedelic (The Beatles, 1966). Moreover, *Tomorrow Never Knows*' lyrics speak directly to psychedelic experience, saying things like "Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream," and "Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void" (The Beatles, 1966).

In terms of visual art, psychedelic poster art is among the most recognizable styles of art that emerged during the 1960s. Psychedelic poster art distorts space and calls on its viewer to imagine the space in the poster as moving, even if its art appears within the standard borders that commonly characterize poster art in non-psychedelic contexts. Even the font styles of psychedelic poster art distort by using techniques that stretch the overly bold letters across larger spaces. The result is an added effort required to at times decipher the text that appears within the borders of psychedelic poster art. With

psychedelic poster art, “Probably the most important factor is distortion... Lettering was stretched and morphed, melted and compressed, inverted and more. This set the base level for the reception of the work, slowing comprehension, privileging the visual over the verbal, mandating a contemplative period followed by an Aha! moment of gestalt comprehension” (Bahr, 2023).

Even since the 1960s, psychedelic art remains an important part of art today. For example, the music style called neo-psychedelia continues to adhere to conventions established in the 1960s with studio effects that loop sounds into winding audio landscapes that mimic the trippy haze of a psychedelic journey, and discordant, ongoing guitar riffs that invite the possibility of descending into something. The 1996 song *Anemone* by Brian Jonestown Massacre, features many familiar elements of psychedelic rock from the ‘60s, such as discordant electric guitar riffs. An more recent example of psychedelic art is the music of Grimes. Grimes’ 2012 song *Oblivion*, on her *Visions* album, is known for its “new age atmospherics, fashioning flimsy components into something sensual and sweetly psychedelic” (Richards, 2012). As this discussion shows, the relationship between psychedelic experience and art spans centuries, cultures and continents, with many human societies either partaking in, or being impacted by, psychedelic art in some way.

The above discussion also suggests that psychedelic experiences in ancient history, and in modern society, are both correlated with the emergence of forms of art that enact the experience that they represent. To illustrate, although some might argue that the presence of abstract elements such as spirals in historical cave paintings indicate a

creative aspect of self-expression, these abstract elements also suggest the possibility of the emergence of styles of art that enact the experiences that they reflect. In other words, it is entirely possible that the distorted body parts (such as spiraling heads or animal forms on human bodies) actually were recording human experience; it is just that the experience itself was distorted due to the psychedelic drug. If this is the case then distortions in psychedelic poster art of the 1960s, as well as the distortions in psychedelic music of the 1960s, and distortions in the form of abstract elements incorporated into cave art, all suggest a relationship between psychedelic experience and art where art enacts that experience by demonstrating the distortions in perception that are common in psychedelic experience. With psychedelic experience in particular, art seems especially linked to conveying the meaning of that kind of experience, with trying to bring to life for others to witness the bizarre changes to perception and consciousness that a person undergoes during a psychedelic experience. Yet, as I will discuss in later parts of this project, an embodied approach to psychedelic experience is uniquely able to account for the possibility that the *process* involved in psychedelic experience – as opposed to the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experiences – is also important to consider, particularly if one is attempting to ascertain the aesthetic value of psychedelic experience.

1.4 Psychedelics in psychology

Psychedelic drugs have been of interest to psychologists and the academic study of the human mind for quite some time, especially because psychedelic drugs are known as potentially powerful therapeutic tools. Psychedelic assisted therapy first started in North America in the 1950s and lasted through to the late 1960s (Carhart-Harris, 2014). During

this first wave of psychedelic therapy, approaches relied on using psychedelic drugs in conjunction with psychoanalytic therapy (Carhart-Harris, 2014; Cohen, 1972). The psychoanalytic assisted approach generally involved ingesting smaller doses of psychedelics to boost the effectiveness of the therapy. It was thought that psychedelics lowered psychological defense mechanisms and therefore provided the opportunity to get at the core of psychological issues (Cahart-Harris, 2014; Cohen, 1972). Another therapeutic method used in the first wave of psychedelic therapy involved ingesting large amounts of psychedelics over only a few sessions so as to bring on a mystical experience or ego-death (Gasser et al., 2014; Cahart-Harris, 2014). These types of transformative sessions aimed to purge psychological issues via psychedelic catharsis. Psychedelic catharsis in the psychoanalytic approach involved a transformation in one's attitude towards personal problems, a kind of purging that the psychedelic experience enabled (Passie and Gasser, 2016). The use of psychedelics as therapeutic tools continued throughout the 1960's to treat various ailments. According to Michael Pollan, "LSD was widely regarded in North America as the cure for alcohol addiction" during the first wave of psychedelic therapy (2018, p. 151). However, psychedelic drug use also increased outside of medical contexts and by the late 1960s governments started to prohibit possession of psychedelic substances (Sproul, 2021). In 1970, American President Richard Nixon signed the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, which made most psychedelics illegal in the United States (Marks, 2021). In 1971, the United Nations categorized most psychedelic drugs as prohibited substances under Schedule I of the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (Sproul, 2021). Canada is a signatory to the UN Convention on Psychotropic

Substances and by the early 1970s most psychedelic substances, including LSD and psilocybin, were illegal in Canada as well (Lloyd, 2024).

After being banned for several decades, psychedelic drugs re-emerged as therapeutic tools in the 2000s (Tupper et al., 2015). In 2007 a group of scientists, including psychopharmacology professor David Nutt, published an article in *The Lancet* calling for the development of a scientifically supported way to assess the harms and risks associated with psychedelic drugs (Nutt et al., 2007). The second wave of psychedelic assisted therapy was introduced at least partly because some medical professionals were concerned with the effects of criminalization on limiting people's access to drugs that were considered to have the potential to convey significant positive therapeutic effects (Nutt et al., 2007).

What, then, are the therapeutic benefits associated with psychedelic drugs? Studies have consistently demonstrated that psychedelic therapy can lead to significant improvements for those who suffer from a wide array of mental health conditions, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and even substance use disorder (Tupper et al.; Mendes et al., 2022). For example, one study showed that both MDMA and psilocybin can be used to treat end-of-life anxiety in those suffering from terminal illness (Tupper et al., 2015). Similarly, another randomized control study out of Switzerland found that LSD had long lasting benefits for those suffering from end-of-life anxiety (Gasser et al., 2014). Recent research has also indicated that when used in therapeutic settings, the benefits of psychedelic drugs are long-lasting – meaning that the benefits outlast the direct effects of being under the influence. A 2006 double-blind study

by Griffiths et al., found that two-thirds of the subjects that had a mystical experience from psilocybin reported that the experience was among the top five most meaningful, or was the single most meaningful experience, of their lives (Griffiths et al., 2006). In a different follow up study, Griffiths et al., found that the positive effects occasioned through psilocybin therapy endured for subjects at the fourteen-month follow-up (Griffiths et al., 2011).

One of the ways that psychedelic experiences lead to lasting benefits is via Drug Induced Ego Dissolution (DIED), where psychedelic experiences cause a significant disruption to the sense of self. DIED experiences with psychedelics involve a loss of sense of self, with users saying things like “I truly had to let go of myself” (Millière, 2017, p. 4). Studies identify two brain networks, both correlated with the self, that are disrupted in psychedelic experiences. First, psychedelic drugs disrupt the default mode network (DMN) (Carhart-Harris, 2014). The DMN is a large area in the brain that is active when the brain is not engaged in a task (Won et al., 2021). The DMN is also the part of the brain that enables focused and self-directed activity, and is correlated with the narrative self (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). The other brain area implicated in psychedelic experiences is the salience network (SLN). The salience network is the area of the brain correlated with the embodied self, salience and emotional feelings (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). Philosophers Letheby and Gerrans state that weakened or abolished sense of ego is a common effect of psychedelic drugs (2017). Yet, how exactly psychedelics work to diminish or abolish the sense of self remains a mystery (Millière, 2017, p. 11).

Psychologists working with individuals suffering from end-of-life anxiety who undergo DIED experiences from ingesting psychedelic drugs found that psychedelic experiences lead to transcendent states of consciousness (Carhart-Harris, 2014). These transcendent states of consciousness involve loss of the sense of self and a corresponding increased sense of connection (Carhart-Harris, 2014). For example, studies have shown that psilocybin commonly involves “profound feelings of connection during the experience” (Smith & Sisti, 2021, p. 804). For some, the sense of increased connection includes an increased sense of connection with nature and animals. Anthropologist Benny Shannon states that “ayahuasca drinkers experience a special, close link to nature with ensuing insights and apprehension concerning plants, animals and the global phenomenon of biological life” (Shannon, 2010, p. 268). When the ego loses its grip on the sense of self, the person under the influence of the psychedelic starts to “...build relations with plants or with the entire living world around” and tends to think less about themselves and more “across borders” (Gasser et al. 2015, p. 6). Overall, the effect of transcendence is to locate the person “in a far larger landscape” and to increase the sense of connection (Grob et al., 2013, p. 299). That psychedelic experiences include an increased sense of connection is important given that sense of connection is a recognized factor in determining psychological wellbeing (Kettner et al., 2019). Although the sense of connection occasioned via psychedelic experiences is often associated with mystical aspect of such experiences, as will be discussed more below, some philosophers suggest that a sense of connection can be present even where the mystical is absent (Letheby, 2017).

Empirical studies show that psychedelic experiences increase personality trait openness. Openness to experience, commonly called “openness” for short, is one of the five major personality traits measured in the Big Five model (Raya et al., 2023). The Big Five model is a widely accepted standard in psychology for measuring personality. Openness refers to an individual’s “...tendency to seek out new experiences and to be willing to explore ideas, values, emotions, and sensations that differ from their previous experience or established preferences” (Raya et al., 2023). Studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between psychedelic experience and increases to personality trait openness. For example, one study found that psilocybin experiences can lead to long-lasting increases in personality trait openness (MacLean et al., 2011). Another study found lasting increases in personality trait openness occasioned from LSD (Lebedev et al., 2016). This is important because individuals with more open personalities tend to be willing to seek out new experiences and explore new ideas, and openness is connected with creativity because people who are more open tend to be more comfortable exploring new or unconventional ideas (Sjöström, Claesdotter-Knutsson, & Kajonius, 2024). Moreover, psychedelic drugs appear unique in their ability to increase personality trait openness when compared with other drugs such as SSRIs, which are commonly prescribed to treat mental health conditions like depression. Although commonly prescribed to treat depression, SSRIs have not resulted in increased personality trait openness, whereas psilocybin has (Smith & Sisti, 2021). This is important because increased openness is correlated not only with greater creativity but also with greater global health and achievement (Raya, et al., 2023). In other words, people who are more open tend to be

healthier *and* more creative. As such, if psychedelic drugs increase personality trait openness, then this suggests a significant positive benefit associated with psychedelic experiences since these experiences can improve a person's life in important ways. Moreover, research indicates that the benefits occasioned through psychedelic experiences, specifically increased personality trait openness, is not currently available from more conventional pharmaceutical approaches (as mentioned above).

Still, even though they convey significant benefits in some medical contexts, psychedelic substances remain highly regulated in Canada. Generally speaking, the classification of psychedelic drugs in Canada is connected to the harms associated with the drugs (Ball, 2021). LSD and psilocybin are currently classified as a Schedule III substances under the Canadian Controlled Substances Act of Canada (CDSA), which makes it an offence to possess the substances under section 6 (Government of Canada, 1996, §6). Sentences for violating section 6 of the CDSA range from a \$1,000 fine for a first offence to up to a term of imprisonment of no more than three years, if pursued as an indictable offence. In contrast, drugs under Schedule I of the CDSA carry the severest penalties, presumably based on the idea that these drugs carry the highest potential for harm. Schedule I drugs include cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl (among others) – substances that are known to be especially addictive and potentially harmful (Government of Canada, 1996). Penalties for possessing Schedule I drugs are set out in section 4 of the CDSA and range from a \$1,000 fine for a first offence up to a term of imprisonment for not more than seven years if pursued as an indictable offence. It makes intuitive sense to think that the scheduling of controlled substances in Canada should be based on putative harms,

including their potential for addiction. However, as will be discussed below, the issue is that the risks associated with certain Schedule III drugs, specifically psilocybin and LSD, might not be rationally connected to their prohibition in the first place (Nutt et al., 2007).

In 2014, psychiatrist and psychotherapist Dr. Peter Gasser, and colleagues, conducted the first controlled study of LSD-assisted psychotherapy in North America in more than 40 years (Gasser et al., 2014). The study was a double-blind, placebo controlled, and randomized clinical trial conducted with twelve subjects suffering from end-of-life anxiety. Some subjects were given a full dose of LSD while others received a small placebo dose. All subjects were monitored during the sessions and careful attention was paid to creating the right kind of space for the experiment (Gasser et al., 2014). The study found that both the placebo and full doses carried no significant risks: “Neither the experimental dose (200 µg of LSD) nor the active placebo (20 µg of LSD) produced any drug-related severe adverse events, that is, no panic reaction, no suicidal crisis or psychotic state, and no medical or psychiatric emergencies requiring hospitalization” (Gasser et al., 2014, p. 518). A similar study conducted in 2011 assessed the therapeutic value of psilocybin for treating individuals suffering from end-of-life anxiety (Grob et al., 2011). Although the 2011 study used a smaller amount of psilocybin, that study confirmed earlier studies that found that the drug, as a therapeutic tool, was safe while offering significant benefits to those suffering from end-of-life anxiety (Grob et al., 2011). Collectively, these studies suggest that psychedelic drugs carry relatively few risks, particularly when taken in controlled settings, while offering significant benefits. The recent consensus that psychedelic drugs can be safe confirms that Dr. Nutt and colleagues were justified in calling for a re-

examining of the way that psychedelic drugs are classified in criminal contexts to ensure that the classifications are scientifically supported (2007). As Dr. Nutt states, current “...methodology and processes underlying classification systems are generally neither specified nor transparent” (Nutt, et al., 2007, p. 1047).

Given that psychedelic drugs are uniquely positioned to confer significant benefits to those suffering from various serious ailments, in a context where obtaining therapy is not always accessible, it is important to consider the justifiability of criminalizing these substances at all. Collectively, the current studies in psychology lend weight to the argument for more widespread availability of psychedelic drugs in therapeutic settings, while hinting at the presence of philosophical issues to do with these experiences. In the next section I discuss some of the philosophical issues to do with psychedelic experiences.

1.5 Psychedelics in philosophy

In this section, I discuss some philosophical issues with psychedelics. First, I discuss what it means to have a psychedelic experience. I look at the use of mystical criteria for assessing psychedelic experiences in psychology, and some related philosophical issues with the use of mystical criteria to assess psychedelic experience. I then look at some philosophical discussion around risks and benefits associated with psychedelic experiences. Third, I consider an argument that psychedelic drugs are a kind of moral enhancement tool. Here, I discuss Virginia Ballesteros’ argument that humans are morally deficient when it comes to dealing with the impacts of our technologies, and psychedelics might work to increase our morality and so may be valuable for that reason (Ballesteros, 2019). Finally, I end this section by comparing psychedelic experience and games as tools

for creative expression. In this final part of chapter 1, I look at Thi Nguyen's argument that games can be a form of creative expression. I show that the same criteria that Nguyen uses for creativity in games can be applied to psychedelic experiences, and I argue that psychedelic experiences, similar to games, can be a form of creative expression (Nguyen, 2020).

1.5.1 What constitutes a psychedelic experience?

Psychedelic experiences are commonly understood as resulting from ingesting certain drugs, such as magic mushrooms, LSD or MDMA. Yet, there is a lack of consensus as to what drugs count as psychedelic drugs. For example, Mendes et al. say that THC might be counted as a psychedelic because it "clearly promotes alterations on sensory perception and can induce mystical experiences" (2022, p. 3). The lack of consensus around what constitutes a psychedelic drug is at least partly due to the ineffable nature of psychedelic experiences and the use of mystical criteria to assess them. To illustrate, the mystical criteria that are used to assess psychedelic experiences often invoke loose terms such as "feelings of peacefulness" or "spacelessness" or "oceanic boundlessness" to assess psychedelic experience (Sanders & Zijlmans, 2021). Moreover, some of the mystical criteria that are used to assess psychedelic experiences are also used to assess religious experiences or other altered states of consciousness, such as states brought on during meditation. Given that scientists have not determined the exact manner in which psychedelic drugs cause the alterations in consciousness and perception that they do, it makes sense that assessing psychedelic experiences empirically remains challenging (Barker, 2018). Given the murkiness around assessing psychedelic experiences, due at

least partly to the use of mystical criteria to assess them, it seems reasonable to suggest that we take a new approach to assessing these experiences. Later in the project, I suggest that we look at the concept of ‘psychedelic surrender’ to expose the aesthetic value of psychedelic experiences.

As mentioned above, psychedelic experiences are generally assessed with mystical criteria, such as “a sense of unity, timelessness, spacelessness, objectivity, sacredness, blessedness, peace, paradoxicality, and ineffability” (Sanders & Zijlmans, 2021, p. 1253). The Mystical Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ), the Ego Dissolution Inventory (EDI), the Hood Mysticism Scale (HMS), the 5-Dimensions of Altered States of Consciousness (5D-ASC) scale, and the Inventory of Non-Ordinary Experiences (INOE) all use mystical criteria to assess psychedelic experiences (Breeksema & van Elk, 2021). Mosurinjoh, Roseman and Girn argue that mystical criteria are problematic in that even when mysticism talk is not directly paired with religious language, it still deploys concepts that “carry their own religio-cultural baggage and connotations” (2023, p. 2). More recently, some philosophers have argued that mysticism criteria are not inherently problematic, even if they concede that more needs to be done to explicitly state what is being assessed and what isn’t. In “How to End the Mysticism Wars in Psychedelic Science”, Letheby, Mattu and Hochstein argue that just because psychedelic experiences are assessed using mystical criteria does not necessitate a commitment to the existence of mystical realities (2024). Rather, mystical criteria can be used to measure mystical experiences, without any commitment at all to the existence of mystical realities (Letheby, Mattu, & Hochstein, 2024).

Given that scientists cannot agree on the exact mechanisms that cause the changes in perception and consciousness that are commonly brought about after ingesting psychedelics – all while the list of potential candidates for inclusion into the psychedelic drug category remains contentious – and in a context where there is ongoing debate about how to assess these criteria – it seems appropriate to think that psychedelic experiences are difficult to assess (Baker, 2018; Mendes et al., 2022). Moreover, if the presence of mystical criteria is the primary measure for assessing a psychedelic experience it might be possible to have these kinds of experiences without ingesting any substances at all. In such a case, it could turn out that what makes psychedelic drugs special is the efficiency with which they bring about certain changes to perception and consciousness. The nature of psychedelic experience – as an experience – seems central in discussing the value of these kinds of experiences. Later, I use a phenomenological approach to assessing the aesthetic value of psychedelic experience that looks at the nature of these experiences as experiences that people commonly have and value for their own sakes’.

1.5.2 Psychedelics as enhancement tools

Prior to the psychedelic renaissance that started in 2007, philosophers often treated psychedelic experiences with suspicion (Nutt, et al., 2007). To illustrate, Thomas Metzinger argued that the contents generated by psychedelic experiences are phenomenal “simulata” and are only non-functional artifacts (2003, p. 237). According to Metzinger, the influx of these afunctional artifactual phenomenal contents do not offer “any additional knowledge or information about the world” (2003, p. 249). However, more recently some philosophers suggest that psychedelic experiences might carry unique benefits.

According to Chris Letheby, although psychedelic experiences carry risks they also stand to convey unique epistemic benefits (Letheby, 2016). The problem with psychedelic experiences is that any benefits conveyed are presumptively tainted by the false beliefs that occasion those benefits. In other words, psychedelic experiences are epistemically suspicious because they often involve “comforting delusions” (Letheby, 2016, p. 29). By comforting delusions, philosophers mean that psychedelic experiences tend to help a person feel better, but the cost is to believe something that one normally would consider false. Therefore, there is a real epistemic risk that psychedelic experiences offer benefits only at the cost of being epistemically suspicious. However, according to Letheby, when used in a therapeutic setting, the epistemic risks associated with psychedelic experiences are “somewhat offset by a significant and otherwise unavailable epistemic benefits” (2016, p. 31). The specific epistemic benefits that Letheby discusses include both direct benefits and indirect benefits. A direct epistemic benefit of psychedelic experiences is that they provide knowledge by acquaintance with the potential of the mind and the contingency of the sense of self (Letheby, 2016). A person in a psychedelic state learns new things about what their mind is capable of, and this can be thought of as an epistemic benefit. A person in a psychedelic state might gain direct knowledge of their own mind and of the contingency of the sense of self (Letheby, 2016, p. 33). The indirect benefits that psychedelic states stand to confer include “improved epistemic functionality brought about either by restored cognitive, social, and emotional functionality, or by increased openness to experience” (Letheby, 2016, p. 35).

Similar to how some philosophers argue that there are specific potential epistemic benefits to psychedelic experiences, other philosophers suggest that psychedelics might act as moral enhancement tools. In other words, perhaps it is the case that humans are morally defective because we lack the ability to have appropriate and necessary concern for others. According to Virginia Ballesteros, technologies used today stand to impact future generations, yet our moral faculties have not developed along with these technologies (Ballesteros, 2019). Whereas our moral development evolved to help humans survive in small hunter-gatherer communities, we are currently in a situation where the impacts of our technologies reach far into the future and extend outward across the globe. In other words, there is a spatial and temporal reach to our technological capacity that does not match up with our moral faculties (Ballesteros, 2019). Given that empirical evidence shows that psychedelic experiences lead to positive changes in personality domain openness, which includes greater nature relatedness, it follows that these drugs might be important tools for countering human moral deficiency, particularly with regards to an apparent lack of adequate concern for the environment (Ballesteros, 2019). In other words, Ballesteros suggests that psychedelic drugs can be used to enhance our “moral faculties,” so that we can become better human beings and be better behaved toward nature (Ballesteros, 2019). Although the idea of psychedelics as “moral enhancers” differs in significant ways from Letheby’s argument that psychedelic experiences can be epistemically beneficial, both approaches to psychedelic experience share in common that they highlight some potential unique benefits associated with psychedelic experiences and the philosophical discourse around those potential benefits.

1.5.3 Psychedelics as creative expression

In “Games: Agency as Art”, Thi C. Nguyen argues that games involve a kind of creativity similar to other art forms (2020). Nguyen defines games broadly to include computer games, board games, sports and other kinds of games. To Nguyen, games afford us the opportunity to exercise our agency in new and creative ways, and are similar to creative expression in other arts. Just as a painter might use a canvas to express their creativity, another person might use a computer game to accomplish the same goal. For example, a person might select a particular obstacle course in order to control their game character in new and unique ways. Therefore, with games we are uniquely positioned to exercise our agency in new and creative ways (Nguyen, 2020).

Although the agency afforded in games is limited and simple, Nguyen points out that this is also what offers unique opportunities to express creativity (2020). To illustrate, in a computer game a player must determine how to control their character within the particular system of that character, which imposes limits and also affords opportunities. The exercising of personal agency when controlling a computer game’s character is creative; there is no pre-determined script and various decisions can be beneficial (or not). Moreover, a person playing a computer game can be aware of their agency in the game and can exercise that agency in a variety of ways while also being aware of their agency in real life and exercising their agency in real life. As such, a second way that games enable creative expression is via the layering of agency: the agency of the game is layered with the agency in real life (Nguyen, 2020). A person might respond to elements in the environment external to the game while playing the game – and in such a situation the person’s agency

is layered in multiple landscapes at once. Therefore, games provide a unique opportunity to exercise multiple layers of one's agency and the very act of combining these layers may involve some creative expression. Nguyen points out that we "... can obscure a new medium's artistic potential when we bid for its art status by trying too desperately to assimilate it within a more traditional art form" (2020, p. 105). This is important because it challenges us to consider more openly what counts as creative expression.

Psychedelic experiences might be viewed as similar to computer games in that they too offer new and unique ways to exercise agency and also to layer agency. To illustrate, during a psychedelic experience a person has the opportunity to exercise their agency in new and unique ways. As a body existing in space, a person having a psychedelic experience might feel a weightlessness in their body and so might decide to move differently than they would otherwise. Likewise, internally a person might choose to explore various psychedelic phenomenal contents (or not). The exercising of agency within the psychedelic landscape can also be layered with the normal agency of everyday life. To illustrate, a person might reach for a pen and paper in order to write down what they are experiencing, and this act of layering agencies can itself be creative. The person who is having a psychedelic experience might notice the feeling of the pen differently; when they put the pen to paper there can be a new opportunity to layer agency that is otherwise unavailable outside of the psychedelic context.

There are other interesting similarities between computer games and psychedelic experiences. With both the psychedelic experience and with computer games the user must do something to "join in". In the case of the computer game, the user starts by

selecting the game, whereas the psychedelic user starts by selecting a drug. The computer game player will typically customize their character. Similarly, someone taking a psychedelic drug can also customize by paying attention to things Set and Setting to curate a particular kind of environment. Therefore, character and world customization in computer games is similar to the curation of the immediate environment that is common with psychedelic experience (i.e. with set and setting).

A second similarity between computer games and psychedelic experience concerns anticipation. The psychedelic user often must wait for the drug to take effect before the experience starts, and computer game players are often left to wait in a waiting room for a game to begin. With both psychedelic drugs and with computer games there is an aspect of anticipation that is part of the experience. With psychedelic experiences the user enters a psychedelic landscape, which is also similar to entering a game in that computer games often present distinct worlds. Psychedelic landscapes share some of the same general features, such as especially bright lights and high contrasts. This is similar to computer games, which vary between each game but also share certain common features such as the use of avatars, points, and so on. Finally, both computer games and psychedelic experiences involve learning how to exercise one's agency in their respective landscapes. Just as a gamer gains experience and skill by playing a game more often, so too does the psychedelic user acquire the skill and knowledge that enables them to curate particular kinds of experiences over time. I discuss psychedelic experience as an achievement in the chapter 4 of this project, where I argue that psychedelic surrender is an achievement that makes a psychedelic experience aesthetically valuable.

At the same time, computer games and psychedelic drugs are different in some obvious and important respects. Certainly there are serious risks to taking psychedelic drugs that are absent with computer games. In addition, computer games and psychedelics are markedly different in that with psychedelic drugs there is the potential for the obliteration of agency – i.e. the loss of ego that can be occasioned in psychedelic experience. However, it should be noted that with computer games there is also the possibility for reduced agency given that some people become addicted to gaming. The main point here is not to argue that computer games and psychedelics are identical in every relevant respect, nor is it to minimize some of the risks inherent in taking psychedelic drugs. Rather, my intention is to highlight that psychedelic experiences can involve a kind of creative expression, and that there is already a framework for this in Nguyen’s work on agency as art (2020). As will be discussed in chapter 3, phenomenology is uniquely positioned to explore the aesthetic value of psychedelic experiences.

1.5.4 Psychedelics and the self (or no self)

As discussed in a previous section, psychedelic experiences are known for disrupting the sense of self, and empirical studies engage with the concept of disruption of the sense of self via the study of DIED. DIED experiences with psychedelics involve a loss of sense of self, with users saying things like “I truly had to let go of myself” (Millière, 2017, p. 4). According to Letheby and Gerrans, weakened or abolished sense of ego is a common effect of psychedelic drugs (2017). Studies identify two brain networks, both correlated with the self, that are disrupted in psychedelic experiences. First, psychedelic drugs disrupt the default mode network (DMN) (Carhart-Harris, 2014). The DMN is a large area in

the brain that is active when the brain is not engaged in a task (Won, et al., 2021). The DMN is also the part of the brain that enables focused and self-directed activity, and is correlated with the narrative self (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). The other brain area implicated in psychedelic experiences is the salience network (SLN). The salience network is the area of the brain correlated with the embodied self, salience and emotional feelings (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). How exactly psychedelics work to diminish or abolish the sense of self remains a mystery. Millière states “...at this stage it is still an open question whether DIED should be interpreted as a mere disruption of the ‘narrative self’ involving high-level processes linked to personal identity, or as a disruption of the ‘minimal self’ rooted in bodily and sensorimotor processes”or both (Millière, 2017, p. 11). As discussed below, some philosophers use DIED to argue that there is no self at all.

Letheby and Gerrans use DIED to argue that there is no self. Letheby and Gerrans maintain that a self must minimally have “indivisibility, substantiality, and strict identity over time” (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017, p. 2). According to Letheby and Gerrans, DIED shows that the self is a fiction invented by the brain as it works to bind together features in the environment that are salient for the person (2017). Just as the brain works to bind features of objects by predicting, correcting, and encoding information in regular perception so too does the brain work to bind together information that is salient for the individual over time. Binding explains how we have a sense that there is a thing called a “self,” which we think of as being indivisible, substantial and stable over time, because brains bind information that is salient for the thinker in complex ways. DIED supports the binding-self model because DIED shows that the self can be disrupted. As such, although we tend to think of a self as

an indivisible entity with strict identity over time, DIED suggests that the self is actually a construct that can be interrupted. As will be discussed more in the last chapter of this dissertation, the view that DIED can be used to prove that there is no self is contentious. As Day and Zahavi note, DIED can also be used to support the notion that it is possible to experience a radically minimized self as opposed to no self at all (2026). Moreover, studies in cognitive neuroscience suggest that there are different levels of selfhood. For example, some scientists argue that the bodily self is the “pre-semantic and non-conceptual” self that serves as a scaffold for other, more complex, understandings of the self (Noel et al., 2017). However, the purpose in discussing the relationship between DIED and psychedelic experiences in this first chapter of the project is only to highlight some interesting ways that psychedelic experiences intersect with other areas in philosophy. In this case, I am highlighting how psychedelic experiences trigger philosophical questions to do with the self.

1.6 Chapter 1 Conclusion

In this chapter of the dissertation I explored psychedelic drug use in history and the connection between psychedelic experience and art, which appears to span much of human history as well as societies across the globe. I also considered some of the main issues related to classifying and studying psychedelic drugs in psychology, including the difficulty in assessing these experiences. I discussed the legal status of psychedelic drugs in Canada, albeit briefly, to highlight the current context where psychedelic drugs are tightly regulated, even if they benefits they offer are not readily available otherwise (or at all). Finally, I highlighted some of the main philosophical discourse around psychedelic

experiences, which tend to focus on the epistemic risks or benefits associated with these experiences, as well as the potential of psychedelic drugs to counter-act some purportedly baked-in limits to human care and understanding. Finally, I ended the chapter by highlighting a current discussion around creative agency in aesthetics. This discussion around creative agency and games suggests how expanded concepts of what is aesthetic or aesthetically valuable can help to expose other kinds of experiences to different kinds of philosophical discussion, and thus broaden our understanding of phenomena including psychedelic experience. In the next chapter, I discuss the philosophical discourse around aesthetic experience.

Chapter 2: Aesthetic Experience and Psychedelic Experience

2.1 Chapter 2 Introduction

In this chapter, I take one of the central issues in aesthetics, aesthetic experience, and consider its implications for the psychedelic experiences. Philosophers have long debated the nature of aesthetic experience. I focus on exploring three general philosophical approaches to aesthetic experience. For each general approach, I consider some implications for psychedelic experiences. In other words, I attempt to answer, if this approach to aesthetic experience is accepted, how would it contend with the uniqueness of psychedelic experience? I first consider the role of properties in definitions of aesthetic experience. This debate centers around whether aesthetic experiences have their own properties or whether we are actually just noticing aesthetic properties of objects when we have aesthetic experiences. I then discuss cognitive approaches to aesthetic experience. Here, I look at the notion that an aesthetic experience is fundamentally cognitive or evaluative. For example, an approach that argues that aesthetic experiences are characterized by evaluating certain kinds of objects (such as art objects). Third, I discuss aesthetic experience as an experience that provides aesthetic value. The aesthetic value approach can be a kind of hybrid approach in that in some cases cognitive acts are a part of what is meant by aesthetic experience, which will be discussed more below.

As mentioned, for each of the above three general discussions about aesthetic experience, I highlight some issues that psychedelic experiences present. For example, given that psychedelic experiences tend to be quite varied subjectively, discussions

around the properties of aesthetic experience lead to questions around whether anything can be aestheticized. If aesthetic experiences are primarily cognitive, then one may wonder whether it makes sense to conceive of any part of an especially intense psychedelic trip as aesthetic given that cognition is so thoroughly altered. Finally, if aesthetic experiences are experiences that are valued for their own sakes, and if psychedelic experiences are a kind of aesthetic experience, does this mean that all psychedelic experiences are valuable on aesthetic terms? I end the section by suggesting that embodied phenomenology provides a framework for best approaching the aesthetics of psychedelic experiences.

2.2 The properties of aesthetic experience and psychedelics

In this section, I discuss the debate between externalism and internalism. This debate is important because it answers the question: is there such a thing as an aesthetic experience (as such)? As will be discussed in greater detail below, externalism holds that aesthetic experiences do not have internal properties. To externalists, there are no unique unified features of “aesthetic experience” such that we can say that there is such a thing as an aesthetic experience. Externalism suggests that the term “aesthetic experience” is a hollow expression that does not have any referents. There is nothing like a set of properties which such a term can refer. Rather, when people talk about aesthetic experience, they are merely talking about the properties of aesthetic objects. The competing view is internalism. According to internalists, aesthetic experiences do have distinctive internal properties. When we talk about aesthetic experience, we are not confusing it with an

aesthetic object because there really are some contents to the term “aesthetic experience”.

I then discuss the debate between George Dickie and Munroe Beardsley as this sets out the main arguments between internalism and externalism. However, prior to discussing the debate, I look at Dewey’s process-oriented account of aesthetic experience. Dewey’s account, as set out in *Art as Experience* (1934), heavily influenced Beardsley’s work. And, Beardsley was a prominent figure who attempted to identify the properties of aesthetic experience. After Beardsley published his first main work, Dickie responded to Beardsley’s various arguments in support of internalism, which ultimately led to Beardsley revising his view and acceding to externalism.

2.2.1 Dewey’s process oriented account of aesthetic experience

In Dewey’s process-oriented account of aesthetic experience, the aesthetic is part of what it means to be human. Aesthetic experience, like art, is a part of the process of living (Dewey, 1934; Shusterman, 1997). Part of Dewey’s aim was to democratize the aesthetic. The “museum conception” of the aesthetic limits its accessibility to only a few individuals or relies on authority figures to anoint this or that as “art” (Dewey, 1934; Shusterman, 1997). To Dewey, all of life is connected to a preoccupation with form, and art is “...prefigured in the very process of living” since human conscious experience is preoccupied with the relations in nature, where such relations attend to form. As such, to Dewey, “Art has no privilege concerning aesthetic experiences” (1934, p. 97).

Dewey held that aesthetic experience has primacy over art (Dewey, 1934; Shusterman, 1997). A consequence of Dewey’s elevation of aesthetic experience over art is that the

works of art cannot be used to determine what stands to confer aesthetic experience. In other words, we cannot look at art objects as the starting point to determine whether (or which) aesthetic properties confer aesthetic experience. To Dewey, aesthetic experience is possible in a wide variety of contexts and is not dependent on the properties of a certain class of objects. Dewey's notion that aesthetic experience does not depend on the aesthetic properties of particular objects furthered his goal to "democratize" art (Shusterman, 1997, p. 33). That is, it was important to Dewey that art and those things in the art universe (including aesthetic experience), be available to the masses and not just to a few elite members of an art world. By allowing a wide conception of what counts as aesthetic experience Dewey stood to include more kinds of experiences as aesthetic experience, including kinds of experiences that happen outside of art galleries and museums.

What, then, actually characterizes an aesthetic experience? Here, Dewey discusses "aesthetic unity," but a sense of aesthetic unity that overtakes the one having it, such that the aesthetic experience stands out against regular experience (Dewey, 1934). The nature of the aesthetic experience is therefore that it is consummatory, meaning that it consumes the person having the experience. The consummatory nature of aesthetic experience is what marks an aesthetic experience as an experience that is distinct from other kinds of experiences. And, the consummatory nature of aesthetic experience is also what makes aesthetic experiences valuable. An aesthetic experience can involve dread, horror, disgust, repulsion and can be valuable for its own sake as long as the experience is consummatory. Accordingly, "...we can say that an aesthetic experience is a promise of

consummation, and this promise is enjoyable in itself” (Määttänen, 2015, p. 97). Dewey conceives of aesthetic experience as the state of being taken over, and also a sense that one is fulfilled at the time in question (Shusterman, 1997, p. 33). An experience that is marked as “an” experience – meaning an experience that is a departure from the normal flow of living, that one knows immediately as “an experience” – and which is directly fulfilling – meaning not valued for instrumental reasons but because of what it is as it is – is an aesthetic experience. With this kind of approach any experience is a candidate of aesthetic experience. Dewey indicated that sport, math, scientific proofs, sex – all kinds of activities and objects, could be experienced aesthetically (Shusterman, 1997, p. 42).

A benefit of Dewey’s account is that it reflects our intuition that aesthetic experience is meaningful. Dewey’s account nudges us to remember “what is worth seeking in art and elsewhere in life” (Shusterman, 2006, p. 39). However, Dewey’s account is problematic in some respects. To illustrate, Dewey says that anything can be the subject of aesthetic experience as long as there is a consummatory experience. However, it is counterintuitive to think of some things in aesthetic terms (Shusterman, 1997, p. 29). For example, it might be difficult to imagine how a drainpipe could cause an aesthetic experience, even if for some reason the experience is subjectively consummatory. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine how having a consummatory experience of a drainpipe could be an experience that is valuable for its own sake. Relatedly, it seems that Dewey’s approach is unable to fully explain unpleasant aesthetic experiences, such as how an experience of total disgust might also be valuable in its own sake (Shusterman, 1997, p. 34). Why is it valuable to be completely repulsed by something? Presumably we seek to avoid unpleasant experiences

because of how they make us feel, yet under Dewey's account, even these kinds of experiences can be valuable if they are consummatory, which some might say does not make a lot of sense.

2.2.2 Internalism and externalism: Beardsley and Dickie

In this section, I discuss the debate about aesthetic experience after Dewey's process-oriented account. Whereas Dewey focused on process (i.e. the process of being consumed) to explore aesthetic experience, later philosophers focused on the properties of aesthetic experience and whether the properties of aesthetic experience are internal to those experiences or whether they are just the properties of the objects of aesthetic experience. I discuss the debate between Beardsley and Dickie that lasted several years until 1982, which highlights the main debate between internalists and externalists about aesthetic experience.

In 1958, Beardsley presented an account of aesthetic experience that sought to identify the properties of aesthetic experience (Beardsley, 1958). In his 1958 account, Beardsley argued that aesthetic experience can generally be characterized by attention, unity and intensity. According to Beardsley, an aesthetic experience involves a subject's attention on certain formal properties of an object, which is both intense and unified. Beardsley argued that the aesthetic experience is unified in that it is both complete and coherent. Beardsley explained that aesthetic experiences are complete in that they are detached from external elements. According to Beardsley, this can be evidenced via the satisfaction of a subject's expectations, where said expectations are "counterbalanced or resolved by other elements in the experience, so that some degree of equilibrium or finality is reached"

(1958, p. 528). One might pause here to note the similarity between this aspect of Beardsley's account and Dewey's process-oriented account: specifically that both focus on the phenomenal qualities of the experience and argue that the primary factor that makes an experience an aesthetic one involves being consumed (or something like it in Beardsley's case) (1958, p. 528). Beardsley also argued that aesthetic experiences are internally coherent. Specifically, he said that aesthetic experiences "hang together" and include an "orderly culmination of energy towards a climax" (1958, p. 528). To summarize briefly, in his 1958 account Beardsley set out the internalist approach to aesthetic experience, which means that the properties of aesthetic experience are internal to that experience.

In 1965, George Dickie responded to Beardsley's internalist conception of aesthetic experience (Dickie, 1965). To him, it is not that there are properties internal to an aesthetic experience that are unified, but rather that the unity experienced via works of art are just features of the artworks themselves. In other words, Dickie argued that when we recognize unity in an artwork we are simply recognizing that feature that is part of the internal design of the artwork itself. This does not prove that unity is an internal property of aesthetic experience but instead suggests that it is an internal property of some artworks. According to Dickie, "The harmless expression 'the experience of unity,' which is used as a general way of referring to the seeing of unified design, the hearing of the sound pattern, and so on, is somehow inverted and becomes 'the unity of experience'" (1965, p. 135). Thus, it was in 1965 that Dickie set out the externalist approach to aesthetic experience, which holds that

aesthetic experience does not have any properties internal to it but rather involves noticing the aesthetic properties of the objects of aesthetic experience.

Beardsley responded to Dickie in 1969 by providing a revised definition of aesthetic experience that explicitly includes phenomenal and evaluative components (Beardsley, 1969). According to Beardsley, "...a person is having an aesthetic experience during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated" (1969, p. 5). To Beardsley, there really are features internal to aesthetic experiences that mark them as such. These aesthetic experiences are marked by a high degree of coherence, meaning that "there is in fact an integration of his feelings..." that characterize aesthetic experience (1969, p. 7). Beardsley suggested that there are therefore multiple aspects to experiences, some of which include internally consistent properties that are endemic to them as experiences and are not merely the result of – or attributable to – the properties of artworks themselves.

Dickie responded again to Beardsley in 1974, arguing that there are no objective features to aesthetic experiences that mark them as such (Dickie, 1974). To Dickie, there is no "special unity of experience" that is a property of aesthetic experiences as such (1974, p. 17). Dickie pointed to abstract art, and said that we commonly think that a person has an aesthetic experience when looking at abstract art, yet it is not the case that every time someone looks at abstract art, which can be done rather quickly, that expectations are formed. Instead, what happens is that sometimes some people look at a piece of abstract

art and sometimes some people might form expectations as a result of noticing the aesthetic properties of that abstract art. As such, Beardsley's account of unity, reliant as it is on the affective quality of met expectations via engagement with objects of aesthetic experience, cannot be true. Dickie also argued that pleasure obtained via artworks is not necessarily affective. According to Dickie, "[w]e are frequently pleased by something without having a feeling of pleasure" (1974, p. 18). As such, Beardsley had not shown that any purported affective properties of aesthetic experiences are internal to aesthetic experiences as such, but had only shown again that, where they are present, they are attributable to us noticing something in the object itself. In other words, there are no properties internal aesthetic experience; there are just aesthetic properties of objects.

Subsequent to Dickie's 1974 article, Beardsley again revised his view on aesthetic experience, apparently conceding to Dickie that he could not prove that aesthetic experiences have their own internal properties that mark them out as such (Beardsley, 1982). In his final essay on the matter in 1982, Beardsley argued that there is a difference between having a fully-fledged aesthetic experience and having an experience with an aesthetic character. Although it could be common to have experiences that have an aesthetic character, full-fledged aesthetic experiences are rare. Minimally, Beardsley said that such full-fledged aesthetic experiences must have contents that can be attributed to the contents in the objective field of perception (i.e. noticing the actual characteristics, such as form, in objects) (1982, pp. 288-89).

2.2.3 Psychedelic experiences and their properties

The debate between Beardsley and Dickie highlights some issues attendant with focusing on the properties of aesthetic experience. Specifically, the debate highlights the problematic nature of separating the causes of experiences from the experiencer. Applied to psychedelics, a similar set of problems occurs. On the one hand, if we accept that Dickie is right and that we are only noticing the aesthetic properties of objects when we are having an aesthetic experience, then psychedelics stand to aestheticize everything because even a drainpipe can disclose “aesthetic properties” during a psychedelic experience. On the other hand, if we try to delineate the properties of aesthetic experience, we can always find counterexamples where there is something that seems to be an aesthetic experience but lacks those properties. For example, perhaps there is a lack of unity in the affective response to an aesthetic object such that the internal criteria required for aesthetic experience is not fulfilled. In both cases, the problem mainly concerns perception because there is an underlying assumption that experiences and the properties of experiences can be detached from the person having them during perception. An embodied approach that posits the experienced and the experiencer as inextricably intertwined avoids this problem altogether.

As will be discussed in greater detail in chapters 3 and 4, an embodied approach posits the person as in a constant state of change as they interact with the world while at the same time being part of the fabric of the world. I use Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenological account to explore the aesthetics of psychedelic experience as an experience. Conceived this way, the person is not just a combination of organs and meat

stuff and bones directing a body that acts mechanistically in the world, but is rather an entire embodied person and a dynamic fact of the world (Matthews, 2004). As will be seen, Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology is uniquely able to shed light on the aesthetics of psychedelic experience. By taking an embodied Merleau-Pontian approach to aesthetic experiences as experiences we can explore their phenomenal qualities and the phenomenal qualities of psychedelic experiences as well. In other words, we can talk about aesthetic experiences as experiences because they are experiences that people have and that people think are valuable – and move away from discussing the causes of those experiences.

2.3 Cognition in aesthetic experience and psychedelics

Having set out the problematic nature of focusing on the properties of aesthetic experiences, I now move on to consider cognitive approaches to aesthetic experience. I begin by examining Noël Carroll's content-oriented approach and discuss his view that aesthetic experience has three sufficient conditions. First, aesthetic experiences require a certain understanding on the part of the person having the experience. Second, aesthetic experience involves attention that is directed to certain aspects of artworks, which leads to the third condition, which is that aesthetic experience include a certain response. I then discuss Levinson's view that aesthetic experiences involve "aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affective, or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception" (Levinson, 2016, p. 30). Later in this chapter, I explore the implications of Levinson's and Carroll's approaches for psychedelic experiences. Specifically, I highlight

that cognitive approaches might negate the possibility of considering psychedelics as aesthetic experiences if psychedelics involve major impairment to cognition. I discuss some other issues as well.

2.3.1 Noël Carroll's content-oriented approach

Carroll defends a minimalist, content-oriented approach to aesthetic experience. According to Carroll, an experience is an aesthetic experience if includes “attention [that] is directed to the form of the art work and/or to its aesthetic and expressive properties and/or to the interaction thereof and/or to the way in which the aforesaid factors modulate our response to the art work” (Carroll, 2002, p. 164). Carroll also includes a stipulation that the person attend to the form of the work with a certain understanding – in particular, that the person having the aesthetic experience is an informed subject (Carroll, 2002, p. 164). Therefore, the sufficient conditions for having an aesthetic experience include an informed subject, whose attention is directed to the form or aesthetic/expressive properties of the work, and who has an appropriate response to the work.

Carroll's approach rests on the assumption that the sufficient conditions required for aesthetic experience can be known by looking at artworks. In other words, Carroll starts by looking at artworks to determine what it is about these objects that result in aesthetic experiences. By starting with artworks, Carroll's approach stands to narrow the concept of aesthetic experience to objects that might be experienced as objects of art are experienced. Carroll responds to this difficulty by suggesting that different conditions might be necessary for other kinds of aesthetic experience, such as aesthetic experience of nature. According to Carroll, although nature lacks the form of art, one can attend to

nature functionally, “...sizing up the ways in which the contours of an ecological system have evolved from natural processes,” which indicates a kind of “naturalistically informed attention to the apparent teleology of natural processes” (Carroll, 2002, p. 167). Therefore, with some relatively minor adjustments to his list of sufficient conditions for aesthetic experience, Carroll thinks it is possible to experience nature aesthetically.

Still, some argue that one cannot experience nature aesthetically in a manner similar to how one experiences art. For example, Malcolm Budd argues that aesthetic appreciation of nature is imbued with a sense of freedom that is not present in the aesthetic appreciation of art (Budd, 2000). With art, one knows, for example, to ignore that which is outside the bounds of the painting itself, just as one knows to ignore a sneeze when attending an opera (Budd, 2000). However, with nature there is no such instruction because freedom is part of experiencing nature aesthetically. In other words, the freedom involved in an aesthetic experience of nature is a characteristic of what it means to have that kind of experience (Budd, 2000).

In addition to having a narrow concept of aesthetic experience that is perhaps tied too tightly to art objects, Carroll’s approach is also problematic in that he thinks only certain kinds of people can have aesthetic experiences. Carroll states that it must be “operationally feasible to instruct subjects [on how] to attend to aesthetic and/or expressive properties of an artwork...” (2012, p. 168). Carroll provides the following example to show how his content approach enables this kind of instruction:

I do not find it hard to tell people how to go about having aesthetic experiences, especially when it comes to aesthetic experiences of specific works or of works in

specific genres. If we are talking about Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), then I advise the neophyte to pay attention to the use of the point-of-view editing, remarking upon how much of the film has been constrained to tell its story under this discipline... (2012, p. 167).

The above suggests that not all people can have aesthetic experiences. Instead, Carroll's approach requires that subjects have a particular educational background that enables them to pay attention to particular aesthetic content. As such, it is fair to ask: can people who are not schooled in the "ways mandated" really not have aesthetic experiences? This is problematic insofar as it is counterintuitive since most of us think that we are all capable of having aesthetic experiences, even without any prior instruction. Plus, if prior instruction is required, this suggests that maybe the contents of aesthetic experience are more about the properties of the person having the experience as opposed to being required as part of an aesthetic experience.

2.3.2 Levinson's evaluative conception of aesthetic experience

In "Toward an Adequate Conception of Aesthetics" (2016), Jerrold Levinson defends an evaluative conception of aesthetic experience. According to Levinson, "Aesthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affective, or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception" (Levinson, 2016, p. 30). To Levinson, there are three requirements for aesthetic experience. First, aesthetic experience must involve "aesthetic perception of some object" (Levinson, 2016, p. 39). Second, aesthetic experience involves aesthetic perception of an object that is

“...grounded in aesthetic attention to the object” (Levinson, 2016, p. 39) Third, there must be a “positive hedonic, affective, or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception” (Levinson, 2016, p. 39). Levinson insists that aesthetic experiences are experiences that are valuable for their own sake.

In defending his non-minimalist conception, Levinson notes that Carroll’s focus on the formal features of artworks fails to differentiate between merely perceptual experiences and those that might properly be called aesthetic experiences. To Levinson, there must be an evaluative component to aesthetic experiences since such experiences are not merely perceptual, but offer something of value to the experiencer. Levinson’s approach also differs from Carroll’s since Carroll thinks that aesthetic experiences can be negative, whereas Levinson thinks that there is always some positive feature to aesthetic experiences. Levinson has an account of pleasure that includes the cognitive pleasure that one can derive from the perceptual experience or from an analytic experience (Levinson, 2016).

Moreover, according to Levinson, aesthetic attention is “...attention focused on an object’s perceivable forms and properties, for their own sake and in their full individuality, apart from the utility of so attending; on whatever content supervenes on or emerges from such forms and properties; and on relationships among such forms, properties, and contents” (Levinson, 2016, p. 39). Aesthetic attention and aesthetic experience are two different (but often overlapping) concepts because the latter often has an evaluative component. Whereas some theorists tend to think of aesthetic attitude as a precursor to aesthetic experience, Levinson’s focus on aesthetic attention allows for the possibility of

having aesthetic experiences without adopting a certain attitude as a necessary condition. That is, with Levinson's approach, even though an evaluative response *can* be part of aesthetic experience, such response is not necessary as long as there is a positive hedonic or affective response (2016, p. 39). As such, this approach conceives as aesthetic experience in a wider sense, and Levinson says that "aesthetic attention is one thing, and aesthetic experience another, and bigger, thing" (2016, p. 33).

One limitation with Levinson's approach is that it does not seem to be able to account for aesthetic experiences that rely on imaginary objects. To illustrate, some have argued imaginative engagement can result in aesthetic experience (Stock, 2012). This suggests that Levinson's second requirement, that aesthetic perception is "...grounded in aesthetic attention to the object" might put too much emphasis on the object itself (2016, p. 39). However, there are benefits to Levinson's approach. First, note that Levinson's approach does not face the same problems that Carroll's does with the subject of aesthetic experience. Whereas Carroll's insistence on a certain knower who is schooled in the "ways mandated" seems to exclude many from aesthetic experience, Levinson's broader conception of aesthetic experience ignores the subject's education altogether (Carroll, 2002; Levinson, 2016). Second, by requiring a "positive hedonic, affective, or evaluative response" as a condition for aesthetic experiences, it seems that there is room to acknowledge the role of the phenomenal properties of aesthetic experience while making aesthetic experience especially connected with what it is to be human (Levinson, 2016, p. 39).

2.3.3 Psychedelic experiences and judgement

A primary issue that the above cognitive roles flag for psychedelic experiences is whether intensely immersive experiences can be a kind of aesthetic experience. To illustrate, if aesthetic experience requires judgement or some kind of evaluation, what happens if an experience is so overwhelming so as to temporarily alter normal judgement? This is relevant because, as discussed above, some drug induced psychedelic experiences even result DIED (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). Yet, subsequent to these experiences many report memories of vivid aesthetic qualities of the experiences, such as bright lights, beautiful shapes, and so on (Bahr, 2023). Moreover, artists themselves sometimes emerge from these drug-induced states with new material for creative expression, which suggests that the aesthetic properties of psychedelic experiences are an important aspect of those experiences (Bahr, 2023). Finally, this points to an overall question as to what makes an aesthetic experience special if not the very fact that it does jolt us out of ordinary states of consciousness, and sometimes obliterates regular judgement altogether? An embodied phenomenological approach to psychedelic experience that focuses on the relational aspect of the situation, as opposed to specific cognitive faculties or abilities, will enable a richer discussion of psychedelic experience.

2.4 Aesthetic value and psychedelics

I now turn to consider the role of aesthetic value in discussions on aesthetic experience. Some philosophers contend that aesthetic experiences are experiences that are characterized not only by their focus on form, but more importantly on being experiences that are valued for their own sakes. For example, Robert Stecker argues that

when we say we are having an aesthetic experience we mean that we are paying attention “to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things” for their own sake or for the sake of that experience (2006, p. 4). Allen Carlson provides a framework for understanding aesthetic appreciation of nature that includes the notion of scientific understanding and the value of that understanding (2000). Carlson says that aesthetic appreciation of nature is distinct because there is a dual aspect of *what* to appreciate and *how* to appreciate that requires a certain kind of knowledge (i.e. scientific knowledge). In both Carlson’s and Stecker’s approaches, cognition plays an important role but so does value. Aesthetic experiences, including aesthetic experiences of nature, are things that we value for their own sakes, given certain conditions that enable this possibility. Later in this chapter, I discuss some implications of these value-based approaches to psychedelic experiences. Specifically, can we say that psychedelic experiences are experiences that we value for themselves insofar as they involve attending to “to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things” for their own sakes? Or is the aesthetic only incidental to the psychedelic and therefore the psychedelic is only instrumentally valuable insofar as it leads to the aesthetic? Or would it be preferable to take an approach more like Carlson’s and say that psychedelic experiences have the potential to be valuable for their own sakes but only if we learn to appreciate them in a certain way? Ultimately, I suggest that an embodied phenomenology of psychedelic experience is best suited to untangling these questions.

2.4.1 Stecker’s minimal conception of aesthetic experience

Stecker offers what he calls a “minimal conception” of aesthetic experience (Stecker, 2006). To Stecker, the reason we are concerned with aesthetic concepts is because of

aesthetic value (2006; 2019). In other words, it seems uncontroversial to say that there is aesthetic value given that we care about various aesthetic concepts – such as aesthetic experiences and aesthetic properties. According to Stecker, “[t]hose who care about such things as aesthetic experience or aesthetic properties do so because of the belief that they provide something of great value to human beings” (2006, p. 1). Stecker concedes that those who deny the existence of aesthetic value – and those who deny that there is even such a thing as “the aesthetic” – will not be persuaded by his account. To Stecker, once we accept that there is aesthetic value, the next question is: what is the source of that value?

Stecker points to aesthetic properties and aesthetic experiences as two potential sources of aesthetic value. Ultimately, Stecker argues that aesthetic value is a fundamentally the value of a kind of experience (2006; 2019). According to Stecker, aesthetic experience requires only “the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience” (2006, p. 4). Stecker notes that other accounts of aesthetic experience are subsumed by his very broad account. For example, he says that any experience counted as an aesthetic one under Levinson’s cognitive account of aesthetic experience would be an aesthetic experience under Stecker’s minimal conception (2006, p. 4). Having established that his account is a broad construal of aesthetic experience, Stecker confirms that any kind of experience can be an aesthetic experience.

Perceptual experiences can also be aesthetic experiences under Stecker's approach (2019). We can, for example, attend in a discriminating manner to various forms or qualities or meaningful features of things that we encounter perceptually. A beautiful sunset can be the source of an aesthetic experience if one attends to it in a discriminating manner, noticing, for example, the way that its colours fade or project differently depending on the object on which they land or the time of day. According to Stecker, imaginary experiences can also be aesthetic experiences. For example, we can read a book to get information from it, but we may also read the book "to enjoy an imaginative experience" (2019, p. 21). Stecker even says that the laws of nature can be experienced aesthetically. Here, Stecker gives the example of him being "struck by the beauty of some laws of nature such as the law of conservation of momentum" (2019, p. 21). Dreams that include attending to form in a discriminating manner can also be experienced aesthetically, as well as mathematical proofs and even very bad or failed art. As such, it seems that under Stecker's account of aesthetic experience, no particular kind of experience stands to be excluded from possibly being an aesthetic experience, including a psychedelic experience.

Stecker also argues that aesthetic experiences are attended to "...for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience" (2006, p. 4). Stecker views the value aspect of his account of aesthetic experience as essential to holding that aesthetic experiences are the primary source of aesthetic value and aesthetic experiences are valued for their own sakes. Otherwise, if aesthetic experiences are not valued for their own sakes, meaning if they are sought out for some reason other than that they are, in themselves, valuable, then

it follows that we value them for instrumental reasons. And, if we value aesthetic experiences instrumentally, one must logically ask what end they serve, and whether such an end can be determined objectively. Moreover, if we cannot show that aesthetic experiences are valuable for their own sake, then it seems reasonable to question whether aesthetic properties are the source of aesthetic value in a world where aesthetic experiences are sought after for only instrumental reasons (2006, p. 7).

Stecker calls himself an aesthetic empiricist, and so his view that aesthetic experience is the primary bearer of aesthetic value aligns with an empiricist account in that aesthetic value is a concept that is grounded in actual experience. Stecker says that his “minimal conception provides a very straightforward way to understand aesthetic value and explains why it is broadly available in the world we encounter” (2006, p. 10). It is important to note that Stecker’s approach, and others like it, contrasts with Carroll’s content-oriented account in that Carroll must explain what aesthetic properties are if he is to hold them as the primary bearer of aesthetic value. Stecker’s approach avoids this difficulty. However, Stecker’s approach can be criticized on other grounds, and I now move on to discuss two problems with Stecker’s approach.

One concern with Stecker’s approach is that his minimal conception is too broad. Some may argue that he cast his net too wide in holding that basically any experience can be an aesthetic experience as long as it involves “...attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience...” (2006, p. 4). In other words, perhaps it does not make sense to hold that something is valuable if it can be attained virtually anywhere at

any time. Afterall, many of us associate value with things that are either useful (which would imply instrumentality) or with things that we cherish because they are rare in some way. If I have something that I can easily replace with little effort, like a grain of sand when I'm at the beach, then it is probably not very valuable to me. But, if I have something that is difficult or impossible to replace, then I will probably value it a lot more. However, Stecker might respond by saying that some people's lives might be more enriched by aesthetic experiences since they tend to encounter the world in this manner (aesthetically) more readily than others. So perhaps there are those whose lives have more aesthetic value than others' lives. However, an additional problem with Stecker's approach is that it cannot explain how we have aesthetic experiences that are negative. For example, Carroll argues that not only does an account like Stecker's "block" the possibility of negative aesthetic experiences, but it also cannot explain what it means to have an experience that one disvalues for its own sake. In other words, according to Carroll, "Disvaluing does not seem to be an idea that we can conjoin coherently with the formula 'for its own sake.' Language buckles at the prospect" (Carroll, 2012, p. 166). However, Stecker responds that a lack of appropriate vocabulary to explain how something that is valued for its own sake can be negative is a semantic issue (Stecker, 2019). I would also argue that there is another response – which is that we *can* explain how negative experiences can be valued for their own sakes by incorporating some kind of additional action. For example, Ronald Hepburn discusses second order cognitive processes that allow us to "think in" the benefits of otherwise ugly machinery in order to appreciate landscapes that would otherwise be made ugly by virtue of machinery (Hepburn, 2006). According to Hepburn, it is only "by 'thinking

in' a good involving many people, many cities and much technology—as one looks out over a now wind-turbined land- or sea-scape—that one might hope to construct the complex aesthetic experience that would effectively neutralize the offence on the perceptual level” (2006, p. 11). Although Hepburn’s account seems to imply that the conversion from ugliness to something positive depends on the instrumentality of the cause of the ugliness, it does not follow that this instrumentality bleeds through so as to make the overall experience no longer one that is valued for its own sake.

2.4.2 Carlson’s aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic value

In Aesthetics and the Environment: the appreciation of nature, art and architecture Allen Carlson provides a framework for understanding aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment (2000). To Carlson, aesthetic experience is valuable because it includes a deeper understanding of nature and the environment. Carlson’s approach is similar to Stecker’s in that both approaches conceive of aesthetic experiences as valuable. Carlson starts by exploring different philosophical approaches for aesthetic appreciation. He notes that each approach is inadequate when applied to aesthetic appreciation of the environment. For example, under the arousal model for aesthetic appreciation of nature, we open ourselves up to nature – and this opening up (or arousal) is an aesthetic experience. Carlson says the arousal model is inadequate because it dismisses the role of scientific knowledge in aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment (2000, p. 7). To Carlson, when we appreciate the natural environment aesthetically we do so, at least partly, cognitively. Specifically, scientific knowledge about the natural environment facilitates aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment by directing our minds to the

appropriate objects of aesthetic experience. As such, Carlson rejects models of aesthetic appreciation that rely solely on arousal or emotional response and the concern for Carlson is how we know what is appropriate to appreciate when we aesthetically appreciate nature. Ultimately, Carlson argues that the environment is a unique subject of aesthetic appreciation that requires a new approach (2000).

The approach Carlson sets out is the environmental model, which involves looking at the “what” and the “how” to aesthetically appreciate the environment (2000). The “what” to appreciate involves considering what it is that we focus on when we appreciate the natural environment aesthetically. For example, with the natural environment we know what to appreciate and what not to appreciate – and this is similar to art. When looking at a painting we know to look inside the frame and generally we know not to look at the border or what is outside the frame. When listening to music we know to pay attention to the notes, the singing, the percussion and other musical elements, and we ignore, for example, someone’s sneeze in the room. With the natural environment, when appreciating aesthetically, we know to pay attention to features that exhibit interesting patterns or forms, or beautiful colours that pop on flowers in a field; however, we also know that the air balloon carrying a banner advertising gasoline is to be ignored and is not part of the experience. Not only do we know what to appreciate, Carlson says we also know “how” to appreciate with the natural environment since we can use a certain aspection (or gaze) that is aesthetic (2000, p. 41). That is, we see the world around us with a certain eye when gazing aesthetically. Rather than simply trying to find a path through the forest that is the shortest route home after work, I might instead wander home in order to take in what is

around me, paying particular attention to certain elements of the natural environment that are beautiful in one way or another. Carlson uses description to illustrate aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment.

In centering the “what” and the “how” of aesthetic experience, Carlson’s approach incorporates elements from the analytic and phenomenological traditions in order to arrive at a theory of aesthetic experience that is especially well suited to understanding how we aesthetically appreciate the natural environment. To illustrate, Carlson says that part of the appropriate approach to the object of aesthetic appreciation is dictated by the object itself and this focus on the object of the experience is similar to Carroll’s content-oriented approach because both focus on the object of aesthetic experience. However, Carlson’s focus on the “what” and “how” of aesthetic appreciation also relies on a Dewey’s concepts of disruption in flow and is therefore also focused on process. To illustrate, Carlson refers to Dewey’s contention, in discussing aesthetic experience, that “anything that is aesthetically appreciated must be obtrusive; it must be foreground, but it need not be an object and it need not be seen (or only seen)” (2000, p. 50). Thus, for Carlson:

We experience the environment as obtrusive foreground— the smell of the hay and of the horse dung, the feel of the ant, the sound of the cicadas and of the distant traffic all force themselves upon us. We experience a ‘meld of sensations’ but, as noted, if our state is to be aesthetic appreciation rather than just the having of raw experience, the meld cannot be simply a ‘blooming, buzzing confusion.’ Rather it must be what Dewey called a consummatory experience: one in which knowledge

and intelligence transform raw experience by making it determinate, harmonious, and meaningful (2000, p. 50).

The what and the how of aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment in the above passage is phenomenological in that there is a focus on the structure of consciousness as well as a descriptive approach. To illustrate further, Carlson quotes Yi-Fu Tan's description of an aesthetic experience had by someone in a natural setting.

According to Yi-Fu Tan, someone having an aesthetic experience:

...needs to slip into old clothes so that he could feel free to stretch out on the hay beside the brook and bathe in a meld of physical sensations: the smell of the hay and of horse dung; the warmth of the ground, its hard and soft contours; the warmth of the sun tempered by breeze; the tickling of an ant making its way up the calf of his leg; the play of shifting leaf shadows on his face; the sound of water over the pebbles and boulders, the sound of cicadas and distant traffic (2000, p. 48).

To understand the approach phenomenologically, we might say that when appreciating the natural environment our attention is directed at certain aspects of the natural environment while others are absent or ignored. We may notice the way the breeze brushes over a soft bed of hay that we rest on, while the exact mechanics of the photosynthesis of the leaves on nearby trees is ignored, or if present especially present. The manifold of identity is taken in with moments of the experience being disruptions in the flow of overall experience. What was formerly absent in our foreground becomes present as we focus on the leaves on the tree, a single piece of hay that tickles our ear, that are themselves part of a greater whole (i.e. a haystack or a whole body).

This section explored approaches to aesthetic experience that focus on the value of these experiences. In Stecker's and in Carlson's approaches aesthetic experiences are connected with aesthetic value. Still, insofar as either Carlson's approach or Stecker's approach stipulates a consideration of aesthetic properties of objects for aesthetic experience, these approaches assume a distinction between the subject having the aesthetic experience and the object of the aesthetic experience that ultimately distracts from looking at that experience as an experience. At the very least, the focus on the aesthetic properties of objects presupposes that objects can have these properties detached from the person experiencing the object. In the following section, I discuss a phenomenology of aesthetic experience in order to look at this experience as an experience.

2.4.3 Psychedelic experiences and their aesthetic value

Can we say that psychedelic experiences are a kind of aesthetic experience that we value for their own sakes because they involve attending to “to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things” (Stecker, 2000)? Alternatively, do we mostly value psychedelic experiences because they allow us to interact with, or observe, the aesthetic properties of objects? If the first possibility is the case and it turns out that psychedelic experiences are a kind of aesthetic experience that we value for their own sakes because psychedelic experiences involve attending to the forms or qualities or meaningful features of things, then we would want to say that all psychedelic experiences have aesthetic value. This is because during a psychedelic experience, it is precisely the attending to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things that is often the salient aspect of the experience.

With psychedelic experiences, the form, quality and features of things are brought to the foreground, often in a very jarring way. Given that this is the case, we could reasonably conclude that psychedelic experiences are especially aesthetic and valuable for their own sakes. Or if we value psychedelic experiences because they allow us to interact with, or observe, the aesthetic properties of objects, then it would seem that psychedelics are only valuable as a means to an end. That is, in this second alternative, there is a suggestion that it is possible for the objects of aesthetic experience to have aesthetic properties objectively. If objects have aesthetic properties objectively then psychedelics might only be valuable aesthetically insofar as they allow us to observe these properties. However, this is problematic in at least two aspects. First, it is problematic because one might rightly wonder if it is possible to correctly observe objective aesthetic properties in objects while under the influence of a drug that so thoroughly alters cognition. In other words, perhaps the aesthetic qualities of objects that are observed are false during psychedelic experiences. Second, there is also a moral issue here since it suggests that the psychedelic is used merely as a means to an end – in other words, the psychedelic becomes a tool to convene with the aesthetic as opposed to being something that is potentially valuable for its own sake just as other aesthetic experiences are.

2.4.4 There is no aesthetic experience

In “The Myth of the Aesthetic” James Young argues that the differences between the kinds of experiences that are commonly called aesthetic experiences, as well as the differences between the kinds of objects that are commonly called the objects of aesthetic experience, are too great to think that the term “aesthetic” unifies them in some

meaningful way (2024). Moreover, Young argues that approaches to aesthetic experience that rely on the concept of value (i.e. those minimalist theories that say that aesthetic experiences are experiences that we value for their own sakes) – are unhelpful because the reasons that these kinds of experience are valued also varies widely (i.e. value does not unify under the concept of “aesthetic” either). According to Young, “... to apply the concept of the aesthetic to a diverse range of objects or experiences fails to help us understand why they are valuable.” (2024, p. 15). Although Young takes the radical position that the term ‘aesthetic’ should be abandoned altogether, I suggest instead that he is right that aesthetic experience as a concept is vague. Young suggests that the best way to understand experiences that we commonly call “aesthetic experiences” is to talk about these experiences and explain, for example, what it is that makes them valuable. In chapter 4 of this project I take up his call to discuss these kinds of experiences head-on and explain why specific experiences are valuable (2024). That being said, I believe that the term ‘aesthetic’ should not be abandoned because it serves as a general marker of a particular domain – much like how a buoy can indicate the presence of land without necessarily giving specific details that are sensible to the average. Both the buoy in the ocean, and the term ‘aesthetic,’ are useful in providing general knowledge of a domain, even if nothing too specific is gained.

2.5 Chapter 2 Conclusion

In this section, I took one of the central issues in aesthetics, aesthetic experience, and paired it with the psychedelic in order to illustrate some interesting issues. In the next chapter, I look at a phenomenology of aesthetic experience and show why an embodied

phenomenological approach is preferable. I suggest that given that aesthetic experiences are experiences that we have, it makes sense and is reasonable to move away from discussions about the properties of these experiences to discuss the experiences themselves on an embodied basis. Ultimately, I suggest that we can appreciate psychedelic experiences aesthetically and embodied phenomenology provides a framework for understanding the nature of this appreciation. I use Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology to discuss aesthetic experience as an experience. The embodied approach that I adopt avoids the problem of siloing various aspects of aesthetic experience – such as affective or cognitive features of these experiences – which, as seen above, is common in analytic approaches. Taken as such, we can look at aesthetic experience as an experience that people commonly have and value.

Chapter 3: Phenomenology and Aesthetic Experience

3.1 Chapter 3 Introduction

The last of the theories of aesthetic experience that I looked was Allen Carlson's as set out in *Aesthetics and the Environment: the appreciation of nature, art and architecture* (2000). Carlson's approach to aesthetic experience incorporated phenomenology in that he uses description in discussing the 'what' and the 'how' of aesthetic experience. However, as was argued, Carlson's theory still left a lingering question as to whether there really is some special way to appreciate aesthetically? This suggests that Carlson's approach, like those of the other approaches discussed in chapter 2, did not adequately consider the role of embodiment in those kinds of experiences that are commonly called 'aesthetic experiences.'

In this chapter, I examine Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology as set out in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2012). I undertake this to make three points. First, I argue that there is an aesthetic aspect to embodied perception. That is, I attempt to demonstrate that we are pre-reflectively oriented toward the aesthetic via our embodied perception. Second, I discuss embodied perception as relational using two concepts: solicitation and absorption. We are not only absorbed in our embodied experience of the world; the world also calls to us. Finally, I suggest that embodied phenomenology addresses some of the issues with aesthetic experience that were highlighted in chapter 2. Then, having armed myself with the tools of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology in this chapter, I undertake an analysis of what makes psychedelic experiences valuable on

aesthetic grounds in chapter 4 of this project. But, not only that, I discuss what it is about these experiences – what particular aspect of them – is aesthetic at all.

Before starting on Merleau-Ponty's embodied account of perception, I pause here to discuss an important difference in language. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, author Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) points out that the English language places a high reliance on nouns to convey meaning. This contrasts with some Indigenous languages, which are more reliant on verbs. Kimmerer uses the example of the Anishinaabe word *puhpowee*, which means "the force which causes mushrooms to come up overnight" (2013, p. 49). According to Kimmerer, the English language's reliance on nouns results in a focus on finding *that which is responsible for* phenomenon in the world, leaving little room for that which is not knowable outside of this kind of framing. Kimmerer's reflection is philosophically significant since it illustrates that our limits in understanding the nature of aesthetic experience might be built into the English language due-at least partly-to an over-reliance on nouns. Whereas the English language relies on nouns to define phenomenon down to the very last known cause, a reliance on verbs might allow for that which is not knowable by focusing on the causal origins – or formal properties – of phenomenon. As such, the analytic focus on the so-called properties of aesthetic experience might in fact be the result of a limitation in language – and might not reflect a concept that is empty in its own right. Rather than focus on aesthetic experience within the context of an *experiencer* who is *experiencing*, the philosophical approaches discussed in the second chapter of this project seem to focus on the causes of aesthetic experience in order to understand the nature of aesthetic experience. As seen in chapter 2 of this project, some philosophical

approaches look for the noun based correlates of aesthetic experience, and, finding none, conclude that there is no such thing as aesthetic experience after all. An alternative approach is to use Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to explore aesthetic experience as embodied. In this context, there is an active experiencer who experiences the aesthetic as embodied.

In this chapter, I discuss Merleau-Ponty's embodied account of perception and explain why I use this approach to look at aesthetic experience. I provide a phenomenology of aesthetic experience that relies on its connection to the aesthetic structure of perception. Finally, I explore why it is important to think about aesthetic experience.

3.2 Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology of perception

Before discussing Merleau-Ponty's account of perception, I now provide some context that situates his approach relative to that of other phenomenologists. I start with Husserl, since Husserl had a significant influence on Merleau-Ponty's work. According to Husserl, we arrive in the world as an object in the world that "is constantly "present" for [us]" (Husserl, 1913/1962, p. 93). Any knowledge about perception or experience arrived at from that position supposes that there is "a world that has its being out there" (Husserl, 1913/1962, p. 96). The natural attitude is the primordial notion that there is a material world outside of our subjective experience of it, and Husserl was interested in what we can know when we suspend the natural attitude. By bracketing away the assumptions of the natural attitude, we might come to know what is really evident to consciousness. The role of phenomenology, according to Husserl, is to bracket away the assumptions that layer on top of the pure consciousness, so that we can know the truth about experience.

A hallmark of Merleau-Ponty's radical embodied phenomenology is that it rejects the possibility of arriving at pure consciousness via bracketing (Heinämaa, 1999). According to Merleau-Ponty, there is a pre-reflective aspect to our existence that is embodied and part of our conscious experience of the world. Whereas Husserl conceives of all conscious experience as including a layer of "primordial belief" in the natural attitude, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the world is encountered via the living body prior to our conscious abstractions about the nature of experience (Heinämaa, 1999, p. 53). Moreover, whereas Husserl's approach posits the substratum of our conscious encounter with the world as the natural attitude, Merleau-Ponty posits the living body as the primary locus of all possibility (Heinämaa, 2014).

The result of Merleau-Ponty's focus on the living body is to alter the phenomenological method that Husserl proposed. Instead of bracketing away the assumptions of the natural attitude to arrive at pure consciousness, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology focuses on the lived body and centers experience in phenomenological analysis (Heinämaa, 1999). Whereas Husserl's phenomenological approach is deeply personal in its use of first-person description, Merleau-Ponty's approach is markedly different in forcing analysis back to the role of the pre-conscious world of the lived body. Here, the lived body is not a mere mass of material stuff but instead includes all possibility for meaning, and includes the world of facts, history, and ideas into which we are all born. The living body implicates itself in all conscious experience but also expresses and creates the possibility for meaning. As such, with Merleau-Ponty's approach we seek to look at experience as

experience, as opposed to taking a phenomenological approach that seeks to transcend experience in order to arrive at pure consciousness.

Husserl said, “Even the phenomenologically reduced perceptual experience is a perception of ‘this apple-tree in bloom, in this garden’ and so forth” (Husserl, 1962/1913, p. 239-240). To Husserl, the “this” of our perceptual experience is that of a conscious subject, and so Husserl’s bracketing means that it is the person’s private encounter with the world that becomes the subject of philosophical inquiry. In other words, we look at the experience and suspend our assumptions, not in order to deny that there really is a world out there, but in order to come into contact with pure consciousness as it is to us. That is why, for Husserl, first person description is an important part of the phenomenological reduction. However, for Merleau-Ponty, the “this” in our perceptual experience is grounded in the living body first. So, according to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologically “this apple-tree in bloom” is always a tree that is encountered with the living body first. With the aesthetic, the primordial layer of aesthetic experience is bodily aesthetic intentionality, which is implicated in aesthetic experience in general.

Merleau-Ponty outlines his embodied account of perception in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2012). According to Merleau-Ponty, we perceive pre-reflectively via the living body. Merleau-Ponty’s approach is radical in that it looks at embodied experience first before abstracting about it. Put differently, it forces the analysis back a level to what it is like to actually be an embodied being in the world while acknowledging that there is no other way to be in the world except via our living bodies first.

To Merleau-Ponty, the lived body encounters the world pre-reflectively in terms of what it can do. The pre-reflective operative intentionality of the lived body means that we “open onto the world” while we are at the same time “embedded in it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. xi). As such, “Merleau-Ponty's basic intentionality is the body subject's concrete, spatial and pre-reflective directedness towards the lived world” (Reuter, 1999, p. 72). The operative intentionality centers the motility of the body. It focuses on what the body can do as a concrete entity in the world. For example, as a living body, I might encounter a tree while walking down a path in the forest and I will probably move around the tree without thinking too much about it. Certainly, it is conceivable that even if I have an active thought “I should move around the tree,” I do not need to actively think about which leg to move first or how far to step, or how fast, to move around the tree. The reason I can move around the tree so easily with my body is because I am pre-reflectively located in space and time via my living body. According to Merleau-Ponty, motricity, meaning the ability of the living body to move in space and time, is an original intentionality (1945/2012, p. 139). But, not only does the living body find itself opening up to the world, it is also enabled by the circumstances of the world, which it reaches out towards, and this characterizes our perceptual experience and is the basic operative intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty's theory of the lived body rejects representationalism and instead posits the body as the original seat of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. x). To illustrate, Merleau-Ponty's embodied account posits that the body encounters phenomenon first and that there is no way to get at objective reality except through our bodies. As such, to Merleau-Ponty, the body always situates the person first, before our concepts about

experience and before any representations of reality. Therefore, the body is at the center of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. With Merleau-Ponty's approach, "intentionality is not mental representation at all, but skillful bodily responsiveness and spontaneity in direct engagement with the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. x). To return to the example of the tree, if I see a tree, I can conceive of the tree as an object that is "out there" in the world, which is represented "in here" – meaning in my mind as the perceiver. This conception of the tree seems to correspond with my lived experience in the sense that it is easy to imagine walking and seeing a tree and then thinking that I should move around the tree. But, to Merleau-Ponty, the tree is something that I would encounter pre-reflectively first with my body. And so, as I walk along in the forest and when I encounter a tree my body will have already made sense of the presence of the tree and its meaning for me and I will know to step around it even before having any thoughts about the tree at all. So it makes sense to imagine that the person who steps around the tree did not need to think about stepping around the tree because their body perceived the tree first. According to Heinämaa, under a Merleau-Pontian approach,

The perceived thing is present in perception in full flesh, so to say. It is not represented by any other entity, be it a mental state, a neural state or a component of some such state, or a picture, an image, an indicative sign or a linguistic item (2014, p. 66).

There is a tendency to think of experience as always mediated via some kind of intellectual process, which is what Merleau-Ponty rejects. The lived body is spatially and temporally located as a concrete entity in the world. Because the lived body is spatially

and temporally located in the world as a concrete entity it is impossible to get at knowledge of the tree without first being in relation to the tree as an embodied entity – our relation to the tree is always via our bodies first. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a cube to discuss embodied perception and says “...in order for my walk around the cube to motivate the judgment ‘here is a cube,’ my movements themselves must already be located in objective space...” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 210). In other words, our knowledge about the world comes always through our bodies first, and the body is the original seat of perception.

3.2.1 Schneider and motile intentionality

Merleau-Ponty uses the Schneider case to talk about the differences between concrete and abstract action. Schneider was a soldier injured from shrapnel in the occipital region of his brain (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 127). Schneider’s case was first studied by psychologists Gelb and Goldstein as an example of agnosia, a condition where patients cannot identify certain objects in their environment despite having otherwise normal functioning of the senses. The Schneider case is important for two reasons. First, it illustrates some problems with representationalism. To Merleau-Ponty, representational approaches to perception that posit that phenomenon “out there” as represented to, and processed by, a brain “in here,” create a false dualism between subject and object. Representationalism holds that our physical movements in space are the result of representational intentions or “act of the will” (Jensen, 2009, p. 376). Representationalism posits the body as an object that stands in relation to a person who is the subject (Jensen, 2009, p. 376). This sort of view posits the person as resident in the body which exists

separately from but in relation to the person. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach radically posits the body as the primary locus of intentionality. It therefore makes little sense, from a Merleau-Pontian approach, to talk about what it is like to be a person while abstracting that subjective experience away from the objective nature of their embodied existence. In other words, what it would be like for me to be in the body of a cat makes no sense because I am always in my body first. Merleau-Ponty uses the Schneider case to talk about the differences between concrete and abstract action in order to show that motility is an original intentionality. Again, by 'motility' I mean the aspect of the body as a spatially and temporally located entity – i.e. how the body moves in space and time. According to Merleau-Ponty, our bodies perceive in the world prior to our conscious representations via the body's ability to do certain things, i.e. via the motility, also called the *I-can* of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. xli). In other words, even though there are conscious representations they are subsequent to embodied experience.

As previously above, Schneider was a soldier who sustained brain injuries that caused agnosia, a condition where patients cannot identify certain objects in their environment despite having otherwise normal functioning of their senses. Merleau-Ponty uses the Schneider case to illustrate his reasons for rejecting a kind of representationalism that posits representation as our primary or original means of interacting with the world. Merleau-Ponty also uses the Schneider case to explore motility as the original intentionality. To Merleau-Ponty, the body is not just a physical body existing neutrally as a spatial, concrete entity in the world, waiting to be commanded by a phantom subject who

resides in the body. Instead, motility, movement in the world, via the *I-can* of the body, is the original seat of perception. The body constantly makes sense of things via its *I-can*.

Merleau-Ponty demonstrates motility as the original seat of perception via the distinction between concrete and abstract action. To illustrate, psychologists observed that Schneider was able to perform concrete actions but could not perform abstract ones – at least not without extra effort (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, pp. 105-6). Concrete action involves movement that does not rely on abstract notions. For example, Schneider did not have to imagine where or what his nose is in order to be able to grasp it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, pp. 105-6). Given that he understood what a nose is, and was not intellectually prevented from being able to have this comprehension, Schneider was able to touch his nose easily on command. Likewise he was able to scratch it if it was itchy and he could pinch it without trouble. However, Schneider was not able to point to his nose when asked without doing certain preparatory movements first. Pointing in space, without grasping, is an abstract movement because there is nothing concrete to contact with the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, pp. 105-6). Schneider also could not draw a circle in the air using his finger, though he knew what the command meant, at least not without taking extra preparatory actions first. Schneider had agnosia. Although he could perform concrete actions (like scratching his nose), he could not perform abstract ones (like pointing to his nose) – even if the actions were related to the same subject matter. Merleau-Ponty uses the Schneider case to show that our embodied perception of the world is prior to our abstractions about that experience, which is why Schneider was able to

touch his nose but could not point to it without extra effort (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. xli).

3.2.2 Intentionalities and their importance

Merleau-Ponty suggests that motility is not the only pre-reflective intentionality that makes up a person. To illustrate, Merleau-Ponty discusses the erotic and argues that erotic perception is part of the intentional structure of the person. Erotic perception is also demonstrated in the Schneider case since Schneider was no longer able to form sexual desire subsequent to his brain injury (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 157). The changes in Schneider, which resulted from a brain injury that left intact normal functioning in other areas, demonstrate that erotic perception is a distinct kind of perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, erotic perception becomes, on analysis, "...a mode of perception that is distinct from objective perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 159). Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty suggests that erotic perception is not just random thoughts that are aimed at particular things out there in the world, but that erotic perception itself involves a structure. According to Merleau-Ponty, sexual life is "an original intentionality" (1945/2012, p. 160). As such, this suggests that there are multiple original intentionalities. Under this approach there is room to consider the aesthetic as another original intentionality.

Before moving on to discuss aesthetic intentionality, I pause here to discuss the importance of intentionalities. According to Merleau-Ponty,

We will, all at once, discover sexual life as an original intentionality as well as the vital roots of perception, motricity, and representation, by grounding all of these 'processes'

upon an ‘intentional arc’ that weakens for [Schneider] and that for the normal subject gives experience its degree of vitality and fecundity (1945/2012, p. 160).

As per the above, the intentional arc infuses life with its “vitality and fecundity” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 160). But, there is a potential problem. To explain, if the intentional arc of the person is composed of original intentionalities, and original intentionalities are the basis for actions and perceptions at the pre-conceptual level, one might think that original intentionalities are only the starting point – i.e. that they are only necessary but are not sufficient – for having a life that is filled with “vitality and fecundity”. Yet, Schneider’s life is *not* filled with vitality and fecundity because of his inability to perform abstract actions or to form erotic perceptions – i.e. it is not the case that his ability to perform concrete actions demonstrates that his life is filled with vitality and meaning. If this is correct then it must be the case that the ability to form abstract concepts or intentions are required for having a life with vitality and fecundity – and so then, the ability to form abstract concepts and to perform abstract actions appears necessary for a life that is filled with vitality and fecundity. Merleau-Ponty hints at this requirement in the above passage, where he says that the original intentionalities infuse experience with vitality and fecundity “...for the normal subject” (1945/2012, p. 160). However, Schneider’s case does not show how these intentionalities infuse life with this sort of meaning because Schneider is unable to do so.

In “Motor Intentionality and the Case of Schneider” (2009), Rasmus Jensen makes a similar point. Jensen argues that Merleau-Ponty’s approach contains two possibilities for the meaning behind original intentionality (Jensen, 2009). In one interpretation, Merleau-

Ponty means that there is a pure original intentionality that is prior to – and distinct from – our conception about it. Under this approach, pure motile intentionality is exemplified by Schneider's ability to perform concrete action when he actually grasps his nose. However, according to Jensen this leads to a logical inconsistency since it is not clear how Schneider can at once demonstrate a pure version of this kind of embodied intentionality while also not being able to exercise the motor ability to move his limbs on command as needed for abstract actions. There is a second possible interpretation, which Jensen thinks is preferable. Under the second interpretation, pure brute embodied motor intentionality and the ability to form concepts both co-exist such that the pre-conceptual is shared with the conceptual. In pathological cases like those of Schneider with his agnosia, what is happening is that there is a disintegration of the "co-operation of motility and spontaneity" (Jensen, 2009, p. 387). Under this second interpretation, Jensen suggests that the problem of being able to perform concrete actions while not having the motor skills to perform abstract actions only indicates the disintegration of the co-existence between these two functions. In other words, on the second interpretation motile intentionality is a necessary condition for what would be constituted as an intentionality that is world directed (even if it is not only embodied or embodied and casually sufficient for subsequent abstract actions). However, this second approach appears problematic in that it is not clear on this view how the co-existence of these two mechanisms works to infuse life with vitality and fruitfulness.

However, a third possibility is that the fecundity and vitality that Merleau-Ponty refers to cannot be reduced via causal explanation to the operation of either one (or several) original

intentionalities (whether motility, the erotic, or others such as the aesthetic) – nor can it be reduced to an understanding of the co-existence between original intentionalities and our abstractions about these intentionalities. In other words, it is not possible to delineate two factors alone that co-exist and are the basis for a perceiver who is able to form meaningful erotic desires and abstract actions – we cannot delineate original intentionalities, abstractions and their co-existence to provide a sufficient explanation. This is precisely because it is in the actual being in the world that vitality and fruitfulness are borne.

Merleau-Ponty says,

The union of soul and body is not established through an arbitrary decree that unites two mutually exclusive terms, one a subject and the other an object. It is accomplished at each moment in the movement of existence. We discover existence in the body by approaching it through a first way of access, namely, physiology (1945/2012, p. 91).

There is not a soul-body relationship or a concrete-abstract relationship that together form a union that is a full person – a merging of a separate subject and object. Instead, there is a participating person that calls the relationship of concrete-abstract, of subject-object, into being. This implies that phenomenology is especially well suited to understanding embodied experience because to define and delineate is to ignore the enacting part of being (the *I-can* of the motile body, for example). Whereas defining and delineating are helpful to articulate into words how basic parts of our intentional structures work, description can portray what it actually means to have an experience precisely because experience is not pre-determined and is always done in the moment. The phenomenological approach, with its commitment to description, is how we “get at”

experiences that are meaningful to us, including aesthetic experiences and psychedelic experiences. Phenomenology is uniquely well suited to exploring how our basic structures prime us for a life filled with vitality and meaning.

Finally, it is important to note that in some of the above analysis, I subjected Merleau-Ponty's radical embodied phenomenology to logical analysis via an analytic approach. I suggest that if not unfair, this misses an essential point of the embodied phenomenology discussed above. Rather than search for the ultimate truth, embodied phenomenology is linked to a commitment that celebrates that there are some phenomena that cannot be understood via strict logical analysis. We are our bodies first and in a world that is always present, we do not merely encounter the world as neutral subjects in it; we are embodied first. Embodied phenomenology is linked to openness. We are not just the function of some processes (whether individual or co-existing) – we are the full embodied experience of a person who is always in a world, and this requires an approach to exploring the nature of being or experience that is open. There is no problem of a body that stands in relation to a world and can be subjected to the laws of the natural sciences yet cannot account for the subjective experience of being. Instead, the person is constantly perceiving through the body, while themselves being perceived as an object in the world, and this is to be celebrated as it provides unending opportunities to create meaning and value.

To summarize this section, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the motile body's original, pre-reflective intentionality is the physical body as an entity that is oriented in space and time. The body, under this conception, is always reaching out to the world via its *I-can*. However, the body is not just a spatially and temporally located entity. The body is also a body with

an erotic structure. In the next section, I explore aesthetic intentionality as another original intentionality. Aesthetic intentionality is part of the structure of the person that, like motility and the erotic, is also embodied. Since intentionalities are the structural origins of the person, this suggests that we are pre-reflectively structured towards the aesthetic.

3.3 Embodied Phenomenology and aesthetic experience

In this section, I discuss aesthetic intentionality as pre-reflective and embodied. Just as Merleau-Ponty said that there is a basic motile structure to perception as well as an erotic structure to perception, there is also an aesthetic structure to perception. We are pre-reflectively structured toward the world via aesthetic perception. Like Merleau-Ponty, I use an example to explore the structural nature of this particular intentionality. Specifically, I look at the case of Derek Amato, who acquired extraordinary musical talents after sustaining a brain injury. The use of empirical cases to support phenomenological enquiry is a hallmark of Merleau-Ponty's approach (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. vii). In the next section, I use a similar approach in order to provide a fuller phenomenological account of aesthetic experience and later, the aesthetics of psychedelics as well.

3.3.1 Derek Amato and aesthetic intentionality

In this section, I discuss Derek Amato's acquired musical savantism to explore the pre-reflective aesthetic structure to perception. Aesthetic intentionality is more primal than abstractions about the nature of the aesthetic because our bodies know the world via the aesthetic before we abstract about the nature of the aesthetic. According to Merleau-Ponty, "perception already stylizes" (Merleau-Ponty, 1969/1973, p. 60). When Merleau-Ponty says that "perception already stylizes," this suggests both that perception is not

neutral but also that there is an aesthetic structure – a style – to perception. Perception is active – not only with the motile body – but also via the aesthetic structure of bodily perception. Under this approach, the aesthetic is like motility and the erotic in that it is an intentionality that informs our perception in the world prior to our conscious abstractions.

Derek Amato was 39 years old when he sustained a major concussion after diving into the shallow end of a pool to catch a football (Fitzgerald, 2021). Shortly after the accident, Amato found himself drawn to a friend's piano. Amato had no prior experience with piano and was astounded to find that he could suddenly play and compose music. According to Amato, "I was doing things I didn't know I could do" (Fitzgerald, 2021). Amato's case is one of the few documented cases of acquired savantism, a rare condition whereby a person acquires prodigious skills after sustaining a brain injury (Fitzgerald, 2021). Like other acquired savants, Amato had no formal training and no ability to compose music prior to acquiring remarkable artistic skills. Since his brain injury, Amato sees three dimensional squares scroll across his internal vision while hearing music, which he plays on the piano (Wilkinson, 2014). Amato is able to compose and perform technical pieces of music without having previous training in piano – his ability to play the piano does not depend on his conscious knowledge of how pianos work. Amato's sense of the music is in his body, which suggests that aesthetic perception is embodied.

The Schneider case is similar to Amato's case in that both cases increase our understanding of embodied perception via disruption to a regular body process (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). In both instances, the pre-reflective nature of some particular aspect of perception is brought to light via the malfunctioning of regular perception. In the Schneider

case, Merleau-Ponty argued that motility is prior to our conscious reflection. Merleau-Ponty demonstrated the nature of the pre-reflective embodied perception of the motile body by pointing out that Schneider had impaired ability to form abstract perceptions (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, pp. 115-6). Similarly, Amato's case suggests that the aesthetic might be a structure of perception that is prior to our conscious reflections about the aesthetic because Amato's musical ability did not rely on conscious learning; his musical ability was instead embodied first. An interesting difference between Amato and Schneider is that in the latter case the disruption to the body process highlighted a distinction between concrete and abstract action – i.e. Schneider's disruption was an injury that limited him in some way. In contrast, Amato's case involved a disruption to regular consciousness but ultimately lead to a new ability. Amato's case suggests that disruptions to regular consciousness (such as with brain injuries), might allow pre-reflective and embodied aesthetic structures of perception to surface.

Finally, Amato's case is not merely idiosyncratic: there are about 50 documented cases of acquired savantism (Fitzgerald, 2021). Other acquired savants find themselves able to create beautiful artworks – even if they are less prolific with their gifts. For example, Orlando Serrell was hit in the head by a baseball bat at 10 years old and then found himself able to perform remarkable calendar calculations, such as recalling weather on specific days, with incredible accuracy (Treffert, 2015). Jason Padgett is also recognized to have acquired prodigious skills after he was robbed and beaten but then found himself able to understand complex mathematical theories (Treffert, 2015). Even though such cases are rare, taken collectively, they suggest there might be a pre-reflective aspect to perception

that is aesthetic in nature. If it is the case that there is an pre-reflective aspect to perception that is aesthetic in nature, it follows that Amato's case might reveal bias toward the nature of conscious perception that cloaks the important role of pre-reflective embodied perception. In other words, Amato's case could be exposing an aspect of pre-reflective perception that is otherwise disguised by conscious perception. In the next section, I move on in the next section to look at Merleau-Ponty's treatment of key concepts in phenomenology and aesthetics.

3.3.2 Aesthetics in Cezanne's Doubt and The Film and the New Psychology

I turn now to discuss two works where Merleau-Ponty discusses topics in aesthetics. First, I look at the role of emotion and the philosophical notion of solicitation in Merleau-Ponty's essay "Cezanne's Doubt" (1946). Then, I look at the philosophical notion of absorption in Merleau-Ponty's paper "The Film and the New Psychology" (1945/2019). I explore these two articles not only because they illustrate some key concepts in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of issues in aesthetics, but also because they highlight the central role of embodiment in a Merleau-Pontian approach to aesthetic experience. Together, "Cezanne's Doubt" (1946) and "The Film and the New Psychology" (1945/2019) show that aesthetic experience is always an experience of something (i.e. is not just a concept but must be deployed in real life in order to be understood). This is important to the main goal of this dissertation, which is to consider the aesthetics of psychedelic experiences.

3.3.3 Emotion and solicitation in Cezanne's Doubt

In "Cezanne's Doubt" (1946), Merleau-Ponty talks about the work and life of French painter Paul Cézanne. Cézanne was known for breaking away from impressionist painting

techniques and for influencing later forms of expression in painting, such as cubism (Merleau-Ponty, 1946, p. 466). Merleau-Ponty's essay makes important observations about the role of doubt in artistic expression, and he also discusses the idea that the subjects of expression themselves solicit responses.

First, in terms of doubt, Merleau-Ponty notes that the doubt that Cézanne experienced was necessary for his artistic expression. Cézanne's doubt, the emotional factor that plagued him and made his life difficult, also caused him to question his technique when he was painting and infected him with an unrelenting sense that he could never quite express the world as it truly was (Merleau-Ponty, 1946). Merleau-Ponty says of Cézanne,

He needed one hundred sessions of work for one still life, one hundred and fifty sittings for a portrait. What we call his work was for him only a series of attempts towards the completed work (Merleau-Ponty, 1946, p. 464).

Cézanne doubted his own ability to portray nature perfectly, and this is why he was always only attempting at completed works. The artistic technique pioneered in Cézanne's post-impressionism was connected to his doubt in that absent Cézanne's doubt, an entire form of expression might never have been surfaced. As such, in "Cezanne's Doubt" (1946), Merleau-Ponty notes a relationship between emotion and aesthetics. With aesthetic intentionality, the relevant aspect of embodiment is not primarily in the *I-can* of the motile body as a spatially and temporally located entity. Instead, the relevant aspect of embodiment links with emotion. In this context, artistic expression stands to surface elements of the world that might otherwise remain hidden.

A second important notion in “Cezanne's Doubt” (1946) is the philosophical notion of solicitation. Specifically, in this article, Merleau-Ponty discusses the notion that the subjects of artistic expression solicit certain responses. Cézanne was not only feeling doubt, where that doubt played an important role in his artistic process, Cézanne was also answering a call to portray nature that originated in the objects that he painted. Merleau-Ponty highlights that Cézanne’s commitment in his painting was to express things that demanded to be depicted according to their own terms:

The object is no longer obscured by reflections, lost in its relations with the air and with other objects; it is as though a secret light glowed within it, light emanates from it, and there results an impression of solidity and matter (Merleau-Ponty, 1946, p. 467).

Philosopher Sara Heinämaa states that for Merleau-Ponty, there is “...an obliging power to the affective percept itself: the thing demands to be painted, and painted concretely in this or that manner...” (2024, p. 97). In other words, the thing that demands to be painted in a certain way solicits a certain response. At this point there is an interesting link with Merleau-Ponty’s later work on the ontological foundation of all being. In *Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty discusses flesh as the foundational ontological factor that enables all being, and says that flesh is structured chiasmically (1968/1964). I return later to discuss flesh and chiasm in greater detail, but acknowledge here that there are philosophical questions that the notion of object solicitation imply.

Given the inextricable connection between body and world in Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the aesthetic, it is clear that any concept of aesthetic experience that relies on a dualist concept of mind and body would be rejected. Under a Merleau-Pontian

approach, an experience is not an experience happening to a person who is some kind of avatar controlling a body that they reside in. Rather, the person is the body, and the body is in the world while also being a part of the world. “Cezanne's Doubt” (1946) is an important work because it is in this early essay that Merleau-Ponty starts to explore his radical concept of embodiment. The world is given to us as we are given to it – as such there is a relational aspect to perception, one where the subjective nature of being not only cannot be separated from the embodied fact of experience, but also where the world has its own demands (or solicitations), which the artist can sometimes surface. According to Merleau-Ponty:

The meaning which Cezanne will give to things and faces in his pictures is suggested to him by the very world which is apparent to him. Cezanne has only set it free, these are the same things and same faces, just as he sees them, which demanded to be painted in this way and Cezanne has only said what they wanted to say (Merleau-Ponty, 1946, p. 476).

Now that I have set out Merleau-Ponty's use of “Cezanne's Doubt” (1946) to explore important philosophical concepts, I move on to discuss absorption in “The Film and the New Psychology” (1945/2019). Absorption relates to the notion that there are different states of consciousness and that we can leave our regular state of consciousness for altered states. As will be seen, this is important for considering the aesthetics of psychedelic experience.

3.3.4 Absorption and The Film and the New Psychology

Merleau-Ponty discusses the perceptual field as a unified field of experience in “The Film and the New Psychology” (1945/2019). According to Merleau-Ponty, approaches to perception that posit the acquiring of information from objects of perception to a processor-brain ignore that perception occurs in wholes as opposed to in parts. Whereas classical psychology posits that a person acquires information from visual data that causes sensations that the brain then works to make sense of, in actuality, the body experiences the perceptual field as a whole field of experience. Under the classical approach, intelligence creates the perception of a unified field of experience when it makes sense of raw data (i.e. after it has processed some information acquired by sensation). However, Merleau-Ponty argues that the perceptual field is experienced as an entire unified field in perception (Rousse, 2015). According to Merleau-Ponty:

Objects and lighting form a system which tends toward a certain constancy and a certain level of stability—not through the operation of intelligence but through the very configuration of the field. I do not think the world in the act of perception: it organizes itself in front of me (1945/2019, p. 336).

According to Merleau-Ponty, film is not a “sum total of words or noises” but is rather a “temporal gestalt” (1945/2019, p. 340). In other words, in film, like in life, we perceive in wholes rather than in parts. In film, like in life, perception does not require some operation of intellect, but rather perception itself organizes. Now that I have set out Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the unified field of perception in “The Film and the New Psychology” (1945/2019), I move on to discuss absorption as it relates to the same essay.

Although Merleau-Ponty did not use the term “absorption,” his account of a unified field of perception hints at how absorption might be relevant to discussions in aesthetics. The regular field of perception is the field that we are normally absorbed in. Our regular perceptual experience is absorbed in a certain way of being. However, we can leave the regular field of perception when and become absorbed in a specific activity, such as when we read a book, write an essay, play a game of cards or watch a movie. As such, absorption can also be the way that “consciousness escapes the field of presence” (Geniusas, 2023).

Considering again the case of Cézanne, we can see that Cézanne was fixated on capturing “things as they appear through the holistic and spontaneous organization of a lived perceptual field” (Rousse, 2015). However, capturing that field required that he (Cézanne) stand at a distance from it. It was only by leaving his absorption in the field of regular perception that Cézanne was able to express it in painting (Merleau-Ponty, 1946). In other words, Cézanne left the field of regular perception and became absorbed in expressing that field of perception. This shows that our regular field of perception involves some kind of absorption, but also that in leaving this regular embodied perception, we stand to uncover other aspects of the perceptual field. As another example, the Schneider case that Merleau-Ponty discussed in *Phenomenology of Perception* also demonstrates the importance of absorption to embodied perception (1945/2012). To illustrate, it was only when some aspect of Schneider’s motricity was broken that he was jolted out of his regular absorbed experience, which highlighted some aspect of how perception works (specifically the difference between concrete and abstract perception). A similar insight is apparent with Amato in that he was able to redirect aspects of perception to highlight

certain aspects of the perceptual field that were previously buried by the fact of his regular embodied experience (specifically the aesthetic aspect of perception). The case of blindsight highlights another empirical example. With blindsight, a person who is clinically blind can nonetheless perceive motion and form in their visual field, even though they do not experience form or motion in any way (Trevethan & Sahraie, 2009). In all of the above cases, it is through leaving (or not being present in) the regular field of perception – often through injury – that some aspect of that field of perception is exposed.

Although he does not use the word “absorption,” Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the aesthetic in “The Film and the New Psychology” (1945/2019) highlights issues in embodied perception that are relevant to absorption. According to Merleau-Ponty, in film, just as in regular perception, we are in a unified field of experience (1945/2019). The gestalt perception of film is temporal – but our experience of film is similar to our experience of real life in that in both cases we are absorbed in a field of perception that organizes itself (that is the active nature of perception).

Finally, to state the relevance of the preceding discussion on absorption succinctly, I discuss absorption because we might be tempted to say that aesthetic experience involves some kind of absorption. To put it simply, we might say that with aesthetic experience we become absorbed in some experience of the aesthetic and leave our regular field of perception. However, one obvious problem with aesthetic experience as absorption is that such an approach brings us back to the original problem that was exposed in the chapter 2 of this project. Specifically, the problem that there is a question as to what we are absorbed in, and whether it is the thing that we are absorbed in that

caused the experience, or whether the experience itself has its own properties. I do not offer a solution to this problem now. Instead, I move on to discuss the implications of the above for an embodied account of aesthetic experience.

3.4 Aesthetic experience and embodied phenomenology

In the discussion above, we saw how Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology rejects dualist approaches that conceive of a separation between a subject who seeks to understand and an object that is the subject of understanding. Instead of taking a dualist approach, Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology posits a person that is always "caught up in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 5). Under the embodied approach, perception is not purely reflective because we are always in our bodies first and it is impossible to detach from an embodied seat of perception. For example, if I see a tree, then I see that tree from the perspective of my body. I cannot see the back half of the tree until I pass it and turn around – it is only when I pass the tree and turn around that I can see what was originally hidden from view. As such, my experience of the tree stands to be filled in by my body's different movements around the tree. Therefore, we can say that to perceive is "always to see from somewhere" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 69). Moreover, the body as the first seat of perception (prior to conscious reflection) posits a body that is always caught up in the world via its motricity but also via other structures of perception, including the aesthetic structure of perception.

As the above discussion demonstrates, the aesthetic structure of perception is open because perception is relational. Perception is relational in that perception includes the solicitations of the world by the body that is caught up in the world. It is here that Merleau-

Ponty's discussion on the ontological ground of Being becomes relevant. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty uses the concepts of flesh and chiasm to explain Being. I now discuss each briefly in order to finally resolve the issue of whether we can even say that there is such a thing as an aesthetic experience when taking a Merleau-Pontian approach.

According to Merleau-Ponty, I am an active participant in world via flesh (1968/1964). However, there is an “entrelacs” with flesh, meaning an interlacing or chiasm, whereby the sentient is at once the sensed. The entrelacs, the chiasm, that is the reversibility of flesh, is the overarching structure of the flesh of Being. Recall that in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty sought to uncover the basic structure of human perception, and found that human perception exists first in the body, before any reflections about the nature of that embodied experience (1945/2012). It is not, I think therefore I am, because I am as a perceiver in this body *before* I have any thoughts at all. My body perceives first, pre-objectively, as a spatial-temporal entity. But, the body is not just a mass of material stuff; it also participates in the invisible world, including the world of ideas, of language, of social and historical facts. Therefore, again, there is a question of a relationship – here the relationship between the visible and the invisible. With chiasm, Merleau-Ponty posits a structure in the basic element of his concept of Being, meaning a structure of the relationship of flesh. In Being, the particular instances, or remarkable variants of flesh that we are, exist not only as the sensible but also experience as the sentient – at the same time (Merleau-Ponty, 1968/1964). As such, flesh is always in relationship with itself since it is two sides of the same thing. In chapter 4 of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes chiasm as follows:

If my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange (1968/1964, p. 133).

Given that flesh is always in relationship through this crisscrossing of the touching and the touched, as “two halves of an orange,” we might imagine chiasm as similar to a mobius strip. In her work on feminist embodiment, philosopher Elizabeth Grosz uses the mobius strip to explain a concept of embodiment that eschews dualist conceptions of embodiment (1994). According to Grosz,

...bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another (1994, p. xii).

The above quote by Grosz is similar to the Merleau-Pontian notion of chiasm, which rejects the separation between the material and the ideal as primary truth. Just as photons can exhibit simultaneously as matter and energy, so too does flesh exhibit, via its chiasmic structure, as both the sensible and the sentient at the same time.

Thus conceived, the body is active, and the aesthetic structure of perception pre-reflectively informs our conscious experience. Therefore, anything can be aesthetic because our aesthetic intentionality is always embodied and our bodies are always caught up in the world. As such, a plant, a sports jersey, a computer program, a tree, a coffee mug, a drainpipe, a psychedelic experience – anything at all – can be aesthetic because the body is caught up in the world with its aesthetic structure freely. We do not, under this approach, merely “notice” aesthetic properties in objects – to frame the encounter in this way misses that perception is active and embodied and there is no such thing as a view from nowhere (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 69). It misses the relational nature of perception that Merleau-Ponty discussed in “Cezanne’s Doubt” – i.e. the fact that the perceptual field solicits certain responses – that the world calls out to us and demands a certain response (1946). Given this, what are we to say about aesthetic experience? In embracing a Merleau-Pontian approach that is radically embodied, it becomes fruitless to describe the concept “aesthetic experience” because doing so forces the analysis back to that very experience as a concept – whereas embodied perceptual experience is more than conceptual.

3.5 Chapter 3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed aesthetic experience under a Merleau-Pontian approach. In the next chapter I explore the aesthetics of psychedelic experiences. Specifically, I surface surrender as the performative task of psychedelic experience, which, when achieved, renders psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable.

Chapter 4: Psychedelic Surrender

4.1 Chapter 4 Introduction

In this chapter, I apply a phenomenological framework to psychedelic experiences and suggest that surrender is the performative task of psychedelic experience. I suggest that to appreciate a psychedelic experience aesthetically, one surrenders. By surrendering, I mean intentionally letting go. I argue that the process of surrendering, of letting go, makes psychedelic experience aesthetically valuable.

I start by investigating the psychedelic landscape, which is characterized by phenomenal contents that are transitory, illusive and unreliable. Using a Merleau-Pontian approach, I explore what it means to be absorbed in a psychedelic landscape with these unique phenomenal qualities. I then consider the notion of object solicitation and suggest a minor (but important) modification to the term ‘object solicitation’ that highlights the active, relational nature of embodied experience. Specifically, I suggest that psychedelic experiences have a performative solicitation, meaning a performative task. That is, with psychedelic experiences there is something that we are called on to do. Psychedelic surrender is the performative task of psychedelic experience. I use a process-oriented account and suggest that the process of surrendering is what makes psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable. I adopt a view of aesthetic experience that is process-oriented and embodied, and in so doing avoid focusing on the contents of psychedelic experience. Psychedelic surrender is the process of intentionally letting go – where that experience of letting go is valuable on its own terms and is a de facto aesthetic experience.

The very nature of the psychedelic is to act as a disruptor of that which we take for granted about the world. Psychedelics inject unpredictability and cause people to question fundamental things about themselves and about the world. Psychedelics are like art in that both work by “...disrupting our habitual patterns of cognition” (Devenot & Erving, 2023, p. 2). The manner in which psychedelic experiences stand to disrupt is also partly political. These experiences do not just cause us to question how we see the world; they also disrupt our view of ourselves as socially situated subjects. A person can emerge from a psychedelic experience with a radically altered view of themselves and their purpose in life (Griffiths et al., 2006). A person whose view of the meaning of life is changed might change how they vote or how they interact with others; they may alter other important aspects of their daily life as a result of psychedelic experience. Psychedelic experiences are also cited as among the most significant experiences of a person’s life for those who have them (Griffiths et al., 2006).

Often, discussions about psychedelic experiences focus on the phenomenal contents of these experiences. For example, people might note hallucinations as an especially memorable aspect of a psychedelic experience. Yet, focusing only on the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experiences (for example, on visual or other hallucinations) yields a concern that these contents are mere artifacts that aren’t valuable (Metzinger, 2003). By focusing on the process of psychedelic surrender, we can understand why these experiences are valuable, even if they do involve phenomenal contents that are illusive, unreliable and transitory. As such, I focus on surrender as the performative task of the psychedelic experience. I set out what it means to have a

performative task, and why this is connected to embodiment, and how it is process-centering. I link all of this back to aesthetic experience and explain how psychedelic experience is a type of aesthetic experience.

Recall that in chapter 1 I explored empirical studies that suggest that psychedelic experiences are valuable objectively. For example, studies show that psychedelic experiences can increase the personality trait openness, which is associated with greater creativity and global health (MacLean, Johnson, & Griffiths, 2011). The phenomenon of Drug Induced Ego Dissolution (DIED) has even shown promise in helping individuals suffering from conditions that are otherwise very difficult to treat (Greif, 2020). Therefore, there is an objective basis for thinking that psychedelic experiences can be valuable as a healthcare tool. What I argue in this section suggests that there are also some good reasons for thinking that psychedelic experiences can be valuable on aesthetic grounds. As will be explored more below, during a psychedelic experience a person is called on to let go of control, to surrender. This performative task of psychedelic experience – the call to let go, to surrender – is valuable for its own sake. Psychedelic surrender is similar to the task of the artist who is called on to surrender to the artistic process in which are engaged. Psychedelic experiences share this in common with artistic creation in general, and like expression in the arts, psychedelic experiences are valuable on their own terms when surrender is achieved.

In chapter 3, I discussed object solicitation and absorption as two concepts that illustrate embodied phenomenology's approach to perception. Absorption and solicitation, from a Merleau-Pontian approach, expose the way in which we are always

already in a field of perception. In this final chapter, I start by using art to explore how solicitation and absorption are enacted in psychedelic experiences. I look at absorption and solicitation in psychedelic experiences to highlight that neither of these concepts quite captures what is so valuable about them. In other words, I try to answer the question of why are psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable? I suggest it is not merely because they involve absorption in a special field of perception, nor is it because of solicitations of the objects of these experiences. Rather, psychedelic experiences are valuable because they provide the opportunity to surrender, to let go. Not only that, psychedelic experiences are special because they provide the opportunity to surrender in a context where the contents of the experience are always changing, are often unreliable and are sometimes illusive. After discussing absorption and solicitation as they relate to psychedelic experiences, I move on to look at psychedelic surrender.

I use art as the thread that ties all these concepts together. The use of art to explore philosophical concepts is not new to this dissertation. As seen in chapter 3, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the unified field of perception in "The Film and the New Psychology" (1945/2019) looked at absorption in perception, specifically in movie watching (i.e. cinematic absorption). Merleau-Ponty also used Cézanne's painting to explore the nature of expression, including his observation that objects of art solicit responses (Merleau-Ponty, 1946; Heinämaa, 2024). Similarly, I also use art to explore psychedelic surrender. The idea here is not to extrapolate individual experiences as universal truths, but instead to explore the aspects of different experiences with art in order to "see the bond" between these phenomena.

4.2 The psychedelic landscape and psychedelic absorption

In this section, I discuss the psychedelic landscape as including a sense of temporality and space that is marked by its freedom and boundlessness. I also talk about the illusive and unreliable nature of the phenomenal contents of the psychedelic landscape. I suggest that feelings of freedom, illusive and unreliable phenomenal contents, characterize the nature of psychedelic landscape that a person is absorbed in during a psychedelic experience.

With psychedelic experience, the absence of object stability becomes less important while time becomes especially important. Time can seem to slow during the psychedelic experience, or it can seem to go especially fast. One might feel as though one is released from the bonds of regular time and able to travel through time. There is a greater sense of “temporal freedom” in psychedelic states, where users report “encountering and living through past and possible future events” (McMillan et al., 2025, p. 3197). The sense of freedom with time during the psychedelic experience highlights possibilities for expanded agency while also demonstrating that the phenomenal objects of the experience are less important than the changes that occur during the experience itself. Whereas changes in visual perception might be memorable due to distortions in the objects of perception, changes in time are especially significant because the changes in time are correlated with a new sense of what is possible. During a psychedelic experience, time ceases to be “one’s master” and instead becomes “...a malleable medium that allows for far more possibilities than one could ever experience in everyday life” (McMillan et al., 2025, p.

3197). Seen this way, time is not reduced to being a mere object but is rather a tool for exploring embodiment.

Not only is time different during the psychedelic experience, but also the experience of space is different. While under the influence of psychedelics a person might feel themselves able to transcend the limitations of their normal embodied reality, such as a person can also subjectively experience their embodied existence as that of an entirely different animal. People under the influence of psychedelics have reported “bodily transformations, including experiences of transforming into animals that can fly across vast landscapes” (McMillan et al., 2025, p. 3197). Psychologists use the term “oceanic boundlessness” to discuss feelings of disembodiment that characterize psychedelic experiences (Smith & Sisti, 2021). The boundless feelings associated with psychedelic experiences, wherein both time and space become malleable mediums for exploration, can also be understood phenomenologically as a feature of psychedelic the psychedelic landscape that a person is absorbed in during a psychedelic experience.

A person under the influence of psychedelic drugs becomes absorbed in a psychedelic landscape. Recall that Merleau-Ponty discussed the characteristics of cinematic absorption in his paper “The Film and the New Psychology” (1945/2019). In that paper, Merleau-Ponty explains how it is that we experience film as a perceptual experience, rather than as an operation of the intellect. According to Merleau-Ponty, cinematic absorption is embodied in that while absorbed in a film, we take in the film as a whole and do not perceive it as the intellect processing various parts of the movie. For example, while perceiving a film we tend to ignore various aspects that go in to the making of a movie,

such as lights, cameras, makeup, costumes and actor selection. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception of film does not happen in a linear manner. Rather, it is the entire body, with all of its senses working together as they may, that experiences a film all at once. Film is perceived first as a pre-arranged whole, rather than having its various parts discerned linearly via acts of the intellect. According to Rousse, Merleau-Ponty's argument about cinematic absorption draws a parallel, which Merleau-Ponty himself notes, to the experience of music. With both music and film, we experience the art as "an already organized and significant whole, not just as a linear succession" of the various elements of the art in question (Rousse, 2015). With psychedelic experiences, a person is similarly absorbed in an entire psychedelic landscape, and it is this landscape that they later emerge from, once sobriety is regained. As will be discussed more below, the psychedelic landscape is experienced as a whole, not as a linear succession of various parts, awaiting interpretation by insertion of intellect in order to have value.

In psychedelic experiences, the senses become unreliable. One way to see this unreliability is to look at the steps that are taken to prepare for psychedelic sessions. These steps often involve carefully curating certain music, the use of blindfolds, and offering the person undergoing the experience a comfortable place to rest (Eisner, 1997). These steps are common partly because psychedelic experiences often involve a mixing of the senses. As Merleau-Ponty noted, "For people under mescaline, sounds are regularly accompanied by spots of color whose hue, form, and vividness vary with the tonal quality, intensity, and pitch of the sounds" (1945/2019, p. 334). However, synesthesia is also experienced outside of psychedelic contexts. For example, Merleau-Ponty compared the

synesthesia that a person on mescaline experiences to Cézanne's synesthesia, saying: "Cezanne said that one could see the velvetiness, the hardness, the softness, and even the odor of objects" (1945/2019, p. 334). Merleau-Ponty's discussion of some synesthetic aspects in Cezanne's perception and in the perception of the person under the influence of mescaline is relevant because it highlights the importance of the relationship between the embodied person and their environment. According to Merleau-Ponty, "My perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once" (1945/2019, p. 334). Again, this lends further support to the notion that a person becomes absorbed in a total psychedelic landscape while under the influence of psychedelic drugs.

According to the above, the psychedelic landscape includes a sense of temporality and space that is marked by its freedom and boundlessness, as well as illusive and unreliable phenomenal contents. In psychedelic experiences, a person is also called on to do something. That is, there is a performative task. Recall that with cinematic absorption, one task is to ignore the mechanics of cameras, booms, lights, sound equipment, makeup, costumes, and everything else that part of the illusion that we believe in watching movies. In watching a movie, we suspend our disbelief and entertain the possibility of a story, as presented, while ignoring what goes on to make that story come to life on the screen. The artist is also called on to do something when she paints a picture. And so now, having looked at some of the general features of psychedelic absorption and the psychedelic

landscape, I move on to talk about what it is that a person is called upon to do in a psychedelic state.

I turn to the use of art to explore the nature of the psychedelic landscape and of psychedelic absorption. *The Bad Batch* is a dystopian fiction movie, written and directed by Ana Lily Amirpour (Amirpour, 2016). The movie is set in a desert wasteland where society's rejects are sent. The movie starts when its main character Arlen is exiled to the desert wasteland for an unknown crime. In one scene Arlen consumes LSD and has a psychedelic experience in the desert. The scene highlights a sense of space, the relationship of the sky and the desert floor, that is not possible in mountainous or other landscapes. In the desert, the sky is not punctuated by different aspects of nature, such as trees or mountains. Instead, it is just the sky, the desert floor and Arlen. Here, the sky is the object that otherwise fades into the background in sober perception, but which, under the influence of psychedelics, seems especially significant. While on psychedelics, objects that are easily ignored in sober perception suddenly "demand to be noticed," and for Arlen it is sky that makes the demand.

At the same time, psychedelic perception also highlights that all things are interconnected. It is not that the thing stands especially isolated from the person who perceives it in psychedelic perception, but instead psychedelic perception brings percepts to the forefront while also increasing one's sense of connection to the outside world (Gasser et al., 2015). For Arlen, the sky appears almost as a character in her psychedelic state. Arlen is not alarmed by the sudden grandeur of the sky, even though it towers over her. She stands awed by it. For Arlen, the psychedelic brings the intertwinement of self and

other to the forefront. That is, Arlen's sense of relationship to sky, her intertwinement with sky, her sense of embodied space standing on the desert floor under the vast sky, is valuable because it brings her relationship with nature into focus. Arlen's experience is also "a temporal gestalt" in this psychedelic landscape as her perception unifies and surfaces new aspects of the environment just as she is absorbed into that environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2019).

4.3 What it means to have a performative task

Having explored absorption and the psychedelic landscape, I now discuss what it means for there to be a performative task. To start, I highlight and discuss the distinction between performative task and object solicitation. Recall that in "Cezanne's Doubt" (1946), Merleau-Ponty suggested that the objects of experience solicit a response from the painter. To illustrate, Merleau-Ponty says that to Cézanne, the object "...is no longer obscured by reflections, lost in its relations with the air and with other objects; it is as though a secret light glowed within it, light emanates from it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1946, p. 467). According to philosopher Sara Heinämaa, Merleau-Ponty's exploration of painting in "Cezanne's Doubt" (1946) suggests that the percept itself has an obligating power: "the thing demands to be painted, and painted concretely in this or that manner" (2024, p. 97). This "demanding to be painted," the "secret light" that glows within objects of perception, is called object solicitation. From an embodied Merleau-Pontian approach, the objects of perception solicit a response – but this in a context where the body is in relation to the object prior to our conscious reflections about the object. Object solicitation, at least from a Merleau-Pontian embodied account, does not suggest that the object has its own

internal voice that makes demands. Instead, it is that consciousness notices the obliging power of the object only once the body has precured what the conscious mind subsequently takes notice of.

I now return to the movie *The Bad Batch* in order to consider Arlen's performative task during her psychedelic experience in the desert (Amirpour, 2016). In the psychedelic scene Arlen is awed by the sky's beauty and magnificence. The sky, in that moment, refuses to be in the background, and it is as though a "secret light" glows from within it. From an embodied approach, Arlen's body encounters sky in her psychedelic state and makes some meaning of it, which her mind notices. This is similar to the subjects of Cézanne's art, which demand to be painted in a certain way, for shadows to be painted here to highlight a certain feature of the object, or a working of light on the object's unique form. Therefore, in Cézanne's case, as in Arlen's, he did not passively notice qualities about the objects of perception that he painted, just as Arlen did not passively notice the sky. Instead, Cézanne was compelled to notice the objects of perception that he painted, just as Arlen was compelled to notice the sky.

This highlights that demanding to be noticed that is part of the obliging power of the objects of perception, at least from an embodied account. The sky for Arlen, like the objects in Cézanne's paintings, have an obliging power. But, whereas the obliging power of the object of perception remains steady with inanimate objects that are the subject of Cézanne's paintings, the obliging power of Arlen's sky is illusive, transitory, and unreliable, and Arlen will cease to notice the sky in that special psychedelic way when she regains her sobriety. Therefore, it seems that the sky is significant for Arlen at the time, but only

fleetingly. This contrasts with the subjects of Cézanne's painting, which were relentless in their demands to be noticed and painted, even over extended periods of time (Merleau-Ponty, 1946). Whereas Cézanne stood to find refuge from the demands of the objects of his perception only when he was able to finally answer their call and paint them as they demanded to be painted, Arlen cannot achieve a definite end that requires some kind of ongoing skill, that demonstrates to the outside world that she has achieved anything more than the ability to pay special attention to things which are normally forgettable in ordinary perception, such as the magnificence of the desert sky. So she notices, one might say. What is the significance of her noticing?

Therefore, how can we say that there was some kind of value that came from Arlen's experience? How could the experience of being high on LSD in the desert and noticing the magnificence of the sky be an experience that is valuable aesthetically? This highlights one way in which object solicitation is problematic for a psychedelic experiences: because the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experiences tend to be transitory, unreliable and illusive, they seem valueless. If only the objects of experience can solicit responses, then psychedelic experiences might really be valueless. However, if it turns out that one can be called on to do something even in the absence of reliable phenomenal contents, then there is the possibility that psychedelic experiences might be valuable. In order to argue that psychedelic experiences are aesthetically valuable, I suggest that their value comes from something other than their phenomenal contents, and from something other than noticing the phenomenal contents of these experiences.

With psychedelic experiences the phenomenal contents of perception are unreliable, illusive and transitory. Whereas a sober painter might look at an apple that she is painting, and as she is painting it pay attention to certain details like its contour or hues, she would expect that if she turns away for a moment, or blinks her eyes, when she turns back, or when she opens her eyes, the apple will still be there. It is true that even a brief absence and return of the gaze might highlight some new aspect of the apple that she had previously overlooked, but the apple itself is still there and has not, for example, changed into an orange. With psychedelic experiences there is a lack of stability in visual and audible objects of perception such that the apple to a person on a psychedelic drug might look like a different object altogether if she looks away, even if only briefly, and then looks back. Thomas Metzinger argued that the contents generated by psychedelic experiences are phenomenal “simulata” and non-functional artifacts that do not offer new knowledge of the world (2003, p. 237). Imagine that a person who looks away from what is a factual apple only to turn back and falsely see it as an orange due to the effects of psychedelic drugs. We might say that cases such as these illustrate that Metzinger was right when he said that psychedelic experiences often entail valueless visual or audible sensations because the objects of these experiences are often distortions of regular objects. However, we might also think that is not the visual perception of the object that matters in the psychedelic experience, but rather the process that is a part of the structure of that experience.

The potential aesthetic value of a psychedelic experience arises from the relational nature of our embodied reality, and the potential to do something other than merely

“notice” the phenomenal contents of the psychedelic experience. But, in order for this to be the case, I need to discuss relational being some more. In “The Film and the New Psychology,” Merleau-Ponty said that the focus is not on explaining phenomenon but instead we seek to “see the bond” between phenomenon (1945/2019, p. 344). Merleau-Ponty alludes to the primary importance of embodied relational being in this sentence because he implies that while we can study phenomenon in order to explain how they work, we might also seek to “see the bond” between phenomena. Seeing the bond requires at least two entities, due to the nature of what a bond refers to. To “see the bond,” therefore, involves acknowledging that there is some link between phenomena, and then to look at the nature of the link between those things, in order to achieve a greater understanding of the phenomena in question. Therefore, one reason for preferring an interpretation of object solicitation that is focused on the relationship between phenomenon is as set out by Merleau-Ponty in his earlier work. Moreover, this approach coheres with the view that embodied experience precures our conscious perceptions, and that we arrive in consciousness with meaning already “baked in” to our bodies. The source of value comes from the body’s relationships. The radical implication is that there is no possibility of value outside of the reality of this embodied existence as the first and primary point of experience.

Merleau-Ponty spoke of intertwinement between the objects of the experience and the experiencer (the senser and the sensed), thus marking the relational nature of embodiment. Moreover, intertwinement also explains Merleau-Ponty’s approach to intersubjectivity:

...the chiasm is that: the reversibility – It is through it alone that there is passage from the ‘For Itself’ to the For the Other – In reality there is neither me nor the other as positive subjectivities. There are two caverns, two openesses, two stages where something will take place – and which both belong to the same world...” (Merleau-Ponty 1968/1964, p. 263).

An embodied account of solicitation centers that which is active – that where “something will take place”. As such, it is not that the objects of perception solicit a response on their own because they have some mysterious independent voice of their own. Rather, the demands of the objects of experience are always coming to take place in relation with experiencing bodies. The sky demanded to be noticed for Arlen when she was on LSD in the desert, which, as discussed above, is similar to how Cézanne’s subjects demanded to be noticed in very particular ways. It is this noticing, then, not the object that is being noticed, that is centered, at least from a radical embodied perspective.

In this context, it makes sense to say that our conscious experience allows us to “see the bond” between phenomenon that we stand in relationship with, whereas attempting to “explain” objects of experience obscures the relational nature of embodied reality (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2019 p. 344). The painter stands in relationship to the subject of their art, as Cézanne did, and it is this relationship that demands a certain expression. I have now put forth a reason to think that there can be performative tasks associated with the objects of perception, simply because to term the task as “performative” means to look at the moving, evolving, relationship between phenomena. Understood in this way, the notion of a performative task can be understood as a slight twist to the notion ‘object

solicitation,’ but a very important one since it highlights the primary importance of action, moving and becoming. In the next section, I discuss psychedelic surrender as a performative task of psychedelic experience, and I argue that psychedelic experiences are rendered valuable when a person surrenders. This is important because even if we accept that a person might subjectively assess their experience as valuable at the time of a psychedelic experience, the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experiences are illusive, transitory and unreliable. As such, even if a person “notices” the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experiences, it is not clear how noticing is valuable, particularly if the phenomenal contents are fleeting phenomenal “simulata” (Metzinger, 2003, p. 237). However, even if noticing the phenomenal contents is not necessarily valuable, there might be something else that one stands to achieve during a psychedelic experience that renders it valuable. I suggest that a performative task of psychedelic experience is surrender, and that psychedelic surrender is valuable on its own terms.

4.4 Psychedelic surrender

While it is true that a person might be absorbed in a psychedelic landscape during a psychedelic experience, I have not yet explored what makes these experiences aesthetically valuable. In this section, I discuss psychedelic surrender as a performative task of psychedelic experience. I then suggest that when a person surrenders during a psychedelic experience, they engage in psychedelic surrender, which is aesthetically valuable. I start with a broad definition of surrender, then I explore surrender as a philosophical concept. I modify philosopher Patočka’s account of surrender to suggest that psychedelic surrender is the process of intentionally letting go, in a psychedelic

context, for its own sake. I start this section by re-iterating why the psychedelic context is unique.

Psychedelic experiences include a context where one cannot rely on the phenomenal contents of the experience as being factually accurate. Moreover, the psychedelic context is often unfamiliar and unpredictable. Therefore, we can say that psychedelic experiences are unique because they tend to be experiences that are unfamiliar, unpredictable, and unreliable. Yet, even though psychedelic experiences tend to be unpredictable, unfamiliar and unreliable, individuals who have had them often cite them as among the most meaningful experiences in their lives (Griffiths et al., 2006, pp. 276-7). Insofar as surrender involves intentionally letting go, the psychedelic context in particular requires a lot of a person if the task is to let go – i.e. to surrender. As I will discuss below, psychedelic surrender is valuable for its own sake. As such, the concept of psychedelic surrender that I examine has moral implications because it suggests that psychedelics might be consumed for reasons of personal development, even outside of therapeutic contexts. The concept of psychedelic surrender that I introduce also has social implications because it suggests that people might want to have psychedelic experiences in different ways than those normally associated with psychedelic drugs (i.e. outside of social contexts such as parties). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the concept of psychedelic surrender that I introduce has political implications in that it suggests that psychedelic experiences and the act of surrendering for no known purpose other than to surrender, introduces new possibilities for creating value in a person's life.

4.4.1 What it means to surrender

To surrender is to intentionally relinquish control while also accepting some state of affairs. Psychologists define surrender as “...the willingness to accept whatever is to come, whether good or bad, without resistance or fighting back” (Russ & Elliott, 2017). Discussions of surrender in philosophy are sparse, but philosopher Patočka looks at surrender in different contexts. I now look at three accounts of surrender provided by philosopher Patočka (1998).

The first account of surrender that Patočka explores is surrender in service of others (1998). Surrender in service of others involves letting go of control where there is an element of sacrifice for others. Patočka discusses this first kind of surrender as the kind of surrender that is a part of being in a family (1998). An example could be a parent who surrenders a part of themselves in service of their family. In such a case, the parent lets go of a part of their own desires in order to fulfill their role in the family. Accordingly, an element of this first kind of surrender is letting go of the wishes of the self, of an aspect of one's autonomy, in service of others. In this context, surrender implies being with others, since a person relinquishes control, in this first sense, in service to others. This first kind of surrender is relational in that it requires an act of service to something other than one's self, some other person that one surrenders one own's interest in service of. This basic kind of surrender involves a letting go of some part of the self that enables a “being for others” (Patočka, 1998, p. 177).

The second kind of surrender that Patočka discusses is surrender in the context of work (1998). Here, we may surrender a part of ourselves in order to work, not because we

wish to work, but rather because we need to work in order to keep ourselves alive. This kind of surrender does not require “being for others” in the same sense that surrender for one’s own family does, because a person can surrender a part of themselves, of what they want to do, of their individual aspirations, to the needs to work, but only because they wish to keep themselves alive. In other words, a person could surrender to their need to work not because they need to work to keep others alive but instead because they need to work to keep themselves alive. According to Patočka, the second kind of surrender is the ideal where “[s]elf-extension takes place in the context of self-denial, overcoming instinctual, immediate desire” (Patočka, 1998, p. 159). As such, a person who surrenders to the need to work might live a solitary life (or they might not). What matters for this second kind of surrender is that the person who surrenders does so out of some practical need to obtain the necessities of life. Whether or not that benefits some others is not the important part here; what matters is that the relinquishing of control and acceptance of some fate is out of self-preservation.

The two kinds of surrender just discussed – surrender as being for others, and surrender for self-preservation – both imply a conversion of the person’s wishes from individualistic ones to uses for others. A person who surrenders to “be for others,” meaning a person who relinquishes control and accepts their fate out of a care for others who rely on them, puts aside their own individual desires ahead of the needs of others. Also, a person who surrenders in order to “be for themselves,” meaning a person who relinquishes control and accepts their fate because they need to work to survive, has the fruits of their labours used by others who benefit from that effort. For example, even in the

context of a person who works to harvest a garden that sustains them, such a person will likely also harvest fruit in anticipation of the demands of others who wish to buy that fruit. And so there is still, even with the second kind of surrender, some element of another person that infiltrates the letting go of control that is involved. The point here is that both kinds of surrender discussed above – surrender in family (being for others) and surrender in work (being for oneself) involve relinquishing control in a context that is relational, meaning letting go as a part of a relationship. Moreover, in both cases, surrender that is service of being for others (such as with the family) and surrender to sustain oneself (as in with work), there is some calculation that enables the person to surrender for that which will eventually benefit their own desires (Evink, 2013). From the perspective of the person who surrenders for work or for family, the sacrifice of the self, the intentionally letting go of parts of the self in service of others or of work, makes the one who surrenders valuable to others. For example, the parent who surrenders to the realities of their role as a parent, to what such a role demands in terms of self-sacrifice, is rendered useful to others in the family, just as the worker who surrenders to the reality that they must work to stay alive, is rendered useful to the employer that they work for, and perhaps to society more broadly as well, as is the person who surrenders to the need to harvest the garden that sustains them while also planning to trade or sell some fruits from the garden.

The other thing to note about the two examples of surrender just discussed – surrender of a parent and surrender to work – is that in addition to letting go of the self, in terms of its own individual desires, there is also a kind of acceptance. That is, a part of surrender in the case of both the parent who surrenders to what it means to be in a family

and to the worker who surrenders to the reality of having to work in order to stay alive – in both cases there is a kind of acceptance of one’s own fate. In this sense, there is an implied hierarchy wherein a person must not always intentionally let go and feel happy in doing so, but must also have a part of their agency reduced in service of some others or of some reality that they are confronted with. Yet, even if the relinquishment of control is in service of others, ultimately surrender still benefits the person who surrenders since it is by this act that they are able to garner the benefits of the relationships that give rise to the opportunity to surrender (i.e. pay or the benefits of being in a family). Still, surrender, if it is done under duress, involves a kind of conversion of oneself to another’s instrumental purposes, even if doing so is ultimately in one’s own best interests. In other words, there is a relational and a transactional nature to the first two kinds of surrender discussed above.

Patočka (1996) also discusses a third kind of surrender that he links with openness and the unknown. With this third kind of surrender, the letting go is not in service of some goal, but is in service of a greater purpose: “Life is no longer its sole own purpose but...there is the possibility of living for something else” (Patočka 1996, p. 37). According to Eddo Evink, this third kind of surrender can be thought of as a kind of “...surrender to uncertainty, to the attitude of asking radical questions that will never be entirely answered” (2013, p. 24). I argue below that psychedelic experiences provide a unique opportunity to surrender that is for its own sake. Psychedelic surrender, during the psychedelic experience, does not generally include evaluating the needs or desires of others in relation to one’s own needs or desires, especially since a person under the influence of psychedelic drugs is often rendered useless to others. Therefore, it does not seem that the

kind of surrender that a person stands to do in a psychedelic context is transactional or relational so as to be captured by the first two kinds of surrender discussed by Patočka (1998). In the next section, I discuss psychedelic surrender as intentionally letting go in a context where no one else seems to benefit and there is only the unknown ahead.

Psychedelic surrender means intentionally letting go and embracing the unknown, and is more like the third kind of surrender that Patočka had in mind, even if it is its own kind of experience (as will be explained below).

4.4.2 Surrender in psychedelic experience

As mentioned in chapter 1, psychedelic experiences can lead to Drug Induced Ego Dissolution (DIED). DIED experiences with psychedelics involve a loss of sense of self, with users saying things like “I truly had to let go of myself” (Millière, 2017, p. 4). Ego dissolution during psychedelic experience is characterized by psychologists as a “state of complete surrender, associated bliss, and union with all things” (Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019, p. 321). Psychologists highlight that where users fail to surrender, the psychedelic experience can involve “intense fear, anxiety, or distress” (Deane, 2020).

Surrender in psychedelic experience means intentionally letting go in a context where the immediate future is unknown, and where one does not let go in order to advance relationships or social need. A person who lets go during a psychedelic experience relinquishes control in a context that is unpredictable. Moreover, what a person is experiencing during the psychedelic journey is not generally available to others to witness, and even after the psychedelic experience the person might have trouble describing what the experience was like to others. As such, it is difficult to imagine how surrendering in a

psychedelic context is done in order to accept one's fate as needing others, as is the case say with the surrender that a person does as a member of a family. Moreover, letting go during the psychedelic experience is often short lived and rarely advances social stature. In fact, given the criminalization and social opprobrium directed towards psychedelic drugs, one might say that psychedelic experiences are unique in the relevant respect that they can impair a person's social goals. As such, surrender in psychedelic contexts is also different than the kind of surrender that Patočka discussed as a part of work because it is not connected to giving something up in order to obtain some necessities (1998).

This all suggests that a person in a psychedelic experience can surrender for the sake of surrendering itself. Psychedelic experiences provide the opportunity to relinquish control in a context where there is no obvious reason to let go other than for the sake of letting go itself. This approach to psychedelic surrender centers process: the process of letting go, of surrendering itself, is what is valued. The process of letting go is the active relinquishment of control, and a commitment to this relinquishment, throughout an experience that can be challenging, partly because it is unfamiliar and unpredictable. This process-oriented account resists the urge to focus only on the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experience, meaning that even though the phenomenal contents of the experience are unreliable, transitory, and illusive, the experience can still be aesthetically valuable because it provides the opportunity to engage in the process of surrender.

As discussed in chapter 2, Allen Carlson set out an approach to aesthetic appreciation in *Aesthetics and the Environment: the appreciation of nature, art and architecture* that involved looking at the what and the how of aesthetic appreciation (2000). To Carlson,

aesthetic experience is valuable because it includes a deeper understanding of nature and the environment. According to Carlson, with aesthetic experience the object of appreciation becomes obtrusive foreground, but, it is only real aesthetic appreciation (as opposed to merely an experience), if the person knows what to appreciate as well:

We experience the environment as obtrusive foreground— the smell of the hay and of the horse dung, the feel of the ant, the sound of the cicadas and of the distant traffic all force themselves upon us. We experience a “meld of sensations” but, as noted, if our state is to be aesthetic appreciation rather than just the having of raw experience, the meld cannot be simply a “blooming, buzzing confusion (2000, p. 50).

The ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment in the above passage incorporates an element of evaluation or cognition that is absent in my account to psychedelic surrender. Instead of focusing on ‘how’ to appreciate, which requires a kind of sober cognition that is evaluative in nature, my account of psychedelic surrender is modified to account for the uniqueness of the psychedelic context. The role of cognition in psychedelic surrender is minimal. This implies that in order to appreciate a psychedelic experience aesthetically, one needs only surrender to the obtrusive foreground, as Arlen appears to do while in the desert on LSD. The psychedelic experience is a consummatory experience, which a person can engage with by actively relinquishing control. With this account of psychedelic surrender, it ceases to matter that the cognitive aspect of appreciation cannot be relied upon due to the effects of the psychedelic drugs because all that is needed to appreciate the psychedelic experience aesthetically is to relinquish control – even in a very unknown, unreliable, and unfamiliar context.

What one surrenders to in psychedelic surrender is importantly unimportant. With psychedelic surrender an objective is to embrace the unknown, therefore the notion of objectless surrender is embraced. The fact that psychedelic surrender involves an unpredictable and unfamiliar context makes it especially unique because a person who relinquishes control in this context must accept the unknown while unfolding into it. Psychedelic surrender requires a certain level of humility and courage.

Psychedelic surrender as a process is similar to the kind of surrender that an artist might engage in as part of their expressive process. For example, a sculptor might be on the lookout for a new stone to carve, knowing only that they wish to carve. As they seek their medium they pass by several different candidate stones, but none calls out to them. Finally, after weeks of searching the perfect stone appears, and the sculptor buys it. They bring it home and spend some time looking at it, before finally starting to cut into it. At this point they have no idea what the final piece will look like, and only a vague concept of shape is starting to emerge as they continue to carve. The sculptor is in a dance of sorts with the stone and commits to an artistic process where the future is unknown; there is no specific ultimate goal in mind in terms of form. Instead, it is the process of becoming, of the sculpture itself taking form, that the artist surrenders to in their work. Similarly, the person on the psychedelic journey can commit to letting go, not because it will lead to some outcome, but rather because this process is, in itself, is valuable. Of course, the difference is that the sculptor might have a tangible piece of art to show for their process in the end. But they might not. And, even if they do, one might just as well say that the sculpture itself is an artifact of the process of surrender that they engaged in, much like

how the stories, memories, or tangible memorabilia from a psychedelic journey can become artifacts of the experience itself.

Psychedelic experiences are known for the vividness and intensity of their phenomenal contents. Colours and shapes can distort and become especially intense. A person under the influence of psychedelic drugs might have an especially strong reaction to music (Shannon, 2002). Psychedelic users often pay attention to set and setting when planning a psychedelic experience. As explained in chapter 1, set refers to the personality and experiences of the psychedelic user and setting refers to elements in the external environment, such as music or lighting (Eisner, 1997). It is known that psychedelic experiences can make a person especially vulnerable to elements in the external environment. Accordingly, there might be a temptation to think of these phenomenal elements as being especially relevant to aesthetic analysis. Yet, interestingly, a process-oriented approach to psychedelic experience highlights that what matters in these experiences is not so much their phenomenal contents (even if they are interesting), but is rather how one reacts to a changing, unpredictable, intense and unfamiliar unfolding landscape. It is this openness to the unknown, and the commitment to surrendering during the unfolding into it, that makes psychedelic experiences aesthetically valuable.

4.5 The value of psychedelic surrender

I set out above what it means to have a performative task, and I explored surrender as the performative task of psychedelic experience. In this section, I discuss two reasons to think that psychedelic surrender is valuable. Specifically, I suggest that surrender during psychedelic experience allows a person to transcend the structures of regular

consciousness. By surrendering, a person stands to enjoy the benefits of a relationship with embodied experience where the self is “unbound” (Letheby, 2017). The psychedelic experience becomes liberatory and is valuable for that reason. Second, I argue that psychedelic surrender points to embodiment as a source of value.

4.5.1 Unbinding and freedom

As discussed in chapter 1 of this project, Letheby and Gerrans use DIED to argue that the self is a mere fiction (2017). Letheby and Gerrans propose that the bound self as a fiction is supported by binding in regular perception (2017). According to Letheby and Gerrans, the brain binds salient information by predicting, correcting, and encoding information in regular perception. Letheby and Gerrans argue that binding explains how we have a sense that there is a thing called a “self”: our brains bind information that is salient in complex ways and in so doing create an illusion that there is a stable entity called a “self” (2017). Letheby and Gerrans use DIED as evidence that the self is a mere fiction created through the brain’s binding process. DIED supports the binding-self model because DIED shows that the self can be disrupted. As such, although we tend to think of a self as an indivisible entity with strict identity over time, DIED suggests that the self is actually a construct that can be interrupted (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017).

If psychedelic experiences lead to an unbinding of the self, a natural question is: how is it that there is a person who stands to experience the unbinding? In other words, the fact that the reports of alleged unbinding are first person narratives itself suggests that there *is* some self that remains. In a recent paper, Day and Zahavi make a similar point, saying “...there is something it is like to first-personally experience extreme ego-

dissolution” (Day & Zahavi, 2026). As Day and Zahavi point out, there is some continued awareness during a psychedelic experience, even one that involves ego dissolution, such that there is a person who is having the experience and who remembers having that experience (2026). Indeed, this is supported by subjective accounts from people who have experienced DIED, who say things like “I truly had to let myself go” (Millière, 2017). Those who experience the unbinding appear to be a witness to *an aspect* of the self’s disintegration. A person experiencing DIED nonetheless seems to retain some ability to direct themselves in terms of how they react to the experience of being unbound. This suggests that the bound self might be a structure of consciousness that a person is able to transcend. There is a precedent for the notion of transcending the structures of regular waking consciousness in meditation. In states of mediation, a person stands at a distance from regular consciousness and is a witness to the mind. In such a state of mediation, the one that is witnessing the mind as distinct is not the same mind, which would be logically impossible. This suggests a possible distinction between the conscious mind and the witness to the mind. Similarly, a person who transcends the structure of their bound consciousness, via DIED, might be experiencing a kind of selfhood that is more primary than the regular conscious mind, similar to what is experienced in states of meditation. Day and Zahavi suggest that with extreme ego-dissolution, brought on by psychedelics, we witness a “radically minimal” form of self-consciousness (2026). Phenomenologically, this experience can be understood as the regular bound self-unbinding and encountering this process of disintegration, which is highly vulnerable.

Paradoxically, the encounter with minimal selfhood offers the possibility to experience being without the regular constraints of the conscious mind, and is therefore freeing. In other words, unbinding exposes the structures of regular consciousness as a kind of state that can be overcome. To illustrate, consider the example of the person who, recounting their experience with DIED, said “I truly had to let myself go” (Millière, 2017). If the person had not let themselves go, which it appears was an option at that time, then they would have been directed toward maintaining the structures of their regular conscious mind. When the person says “I truly had to let myself go,” this implies that they felt strongly compelled to accept the disintegration of the mind-self, which, as explored above, can be understood as part of the performative task of the psychedelic experience, which calls on users to let go. Alternatively, a person might fail to let go during the process of disintegration. In such a case where a person fails to let go, meaning they resist losing control and fail to accept the unknown as it unfolds, then such a person’s intentionality would be directed toward that resistance. The “minimal” self that does always remain would be directed toward fear and resistance at the disintegration of the regular structure of consciousness, as opposed to surrendering to that process of disintegration, by accepting it as it happens and letting go. This would be a mistake, since in such a case a person could not enjoy the opportunity to experience transcendence of the regular structure of consciousness as a free agent who is able to explore a new, and otherwise unavailable, way of being.

When a person surrenders, meaning they relinquish control, they are able to enjoy the fruits of having transcended the bound conscious self. When a person surrenders during a psychedelic experience there is more space to extend outward. When the ego loosens its

grip, the person under the influence of the psychedelic starts to “...build relations with plants or with the entire living world around” and tends to think less about themselves and more “across borders” (Gasser et al. 2015, p. 6). During a psychedelic experience, a person might feel an increased sense of connection with their environment (Grob et al., 2013, p. 299). Anthropologist Benny Shannon states that “ayahuasca drinkers experience a special, close link to nature with ensuing insights and apprehension concerning plants, animals and the global phenomenon of biological life” (2010, p. 268). Plants, animals, other humans all stand to increase in importance while under the influence of the psychedelic drug, just as the self becomes “unbound” (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). That psychedelic experiences include an increased sense of connection is important given that a sense of connection is a recognized factor in determining psychological wellbeing (Kettner et al., 2019).

There is yet a final reason to think that psychedelic surrender might be valuable. Similar to the last reason, which highlighted the expansive agency afforded through active relinquishment of control during the disintegration of the self, a question remains as to what remains once this self is unbound? As discussed above, there is reason to think that some kind of “minimal” self continues to exist, since even users who experience DIED refer to the experience as a personal experience that happened to them (Day & Zahavi, 2026). Moreover, when reporting on these experiences, as was alluded to in the last few paragraphs, those experiencing DIED retain some control and some ability to respond to the situation by either accepting it and letting go, or by resisting. Now, if a person surrenders and lets go, in addition to enjoying the possibility of experiencing being, having

transcended the regular confines of the bound self, a person stands to convene with what it means to be embodied without having the bound self-overshadow that embodiment. In other words, with the bound self relegated to a more minor role (or obliterated altogether?), a person stands to convene with embodiment, meaning with what it means to be embodied, in a more pure way. Merleau-Ponty's conception of pre-reflective embodiment might be taken to imply that the conscious (bound) self is merely emergent. And, as was mentioned above, some philosophers seem to agree that the self is a result of some lower-level processes happening in the brain that work together to create what we experience as our regular conscious "bound" self. As such, taken together, Merleau-Ponty's embodiment, DIED, and self-unbinding, all suggest the possibility that psychedelic experiences allow a person to be immersed in embodied being to a degree that is otherwise unavailable and is valuable.

4.5.2 Surrender and disinterestedness

Philosophers talk about disinterestedness in aesthetics (Guyer, 1978). In aesthetics, disinterestedness can mean that a person who perceives an object does so not because they are interested in what the object might do for them. Rather, a person who approaches an object in a disinterested fashion has no attachment to a particular outcome. Disinterestedness helps explain why it is that we appreciate art and beauty. Simply put, we appreciate certain things because of their own qualities, even if they do nothing for us in a practical sense, and this is what aesthetics is broadly concerned with. Some argue that a disinterested person is able to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of objects because they stand at a distance from the object, and in so doing allow the properties of the object to

stand on their own (Guyer, 1978). Such a person who stands at a distance and is able to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of objects for their own sakes has invoked disinterestedness to achieve aesthetic appreciation. However, it is important to note that disinterestedness seems to be a primarily cognitive achievement. In other words, a disinterested person directs their mind in a certain way towards a certain object. The disinterested person is then able to truly appreciate an object for its aesthetic properties. This could be what some would call an aesthetic experience – the perception of the aesthetic qualities of objects in a disinterested fashion. However, as was explored in chapter 3, disinterestedness assumes that it is possible to separate the object of experience from the subject having the experience. From a radical embodied approach, disinterestedness, as just described is not really possible insofar as bodies and objects exist relationally. Meaning, we can only ever know objects through our bodies first.

A radical embodied approach posits psychedelic surrender as the active relinquishing of control in a context where the normal self (the “bound” self) is relegated to a more minor role (or obliterated altogether). As discussed above, psychedelic experience uniquely casts the “bound” self aside during an experience that can be incredibly intense, vivid, unpredictable and even life changing. Insofar as the disinterested account of aesthetic experience relies on cognition, it seems that it is not possible to appreciate psychedelic experiences in a disinterested way, partly because cognition is so thoroughly altered and cannot be relied upon to offer anything like a predictably valuable experience based on something that is evaluative. However, what psychedelic surrender shares in common

with disinterestedness is the importance of not being invested in the outcome of the experience.

With both disinterestedness and with psychedelic surrender the outcome, as in the practical benefits associated with the experience, are unimportant. We can engage in psychedelic surrender not because doing so sustains us, nor because we stand to advance our social status or to bring home a paycheck, just as we can enjoy art regardless of its lack of practical benefits in our lives. Yet, disinterestedness and surrender are distinct in important respects as well.

That the concept of surrender has not been discussed as fundamental to the aesthetic is suspicious, but less so when one understands the historical approach in aesthetics to prioritizing the role of cognition. Psychedelic surrender as the relinquishment of control highlights the possibility that there is value in embodied experience. Whereas disinterest seems to center the ego as that which stands at the distance from the object of perception, psychedelic surrender requires the nudging of the ego aside in order to have the chance of convening with embodiment in a purer manner.

4.6 Psychedelic surrender and aesthetic experience

In chapter 2, I looked at various approaches to aesthetic experience and highlighted some problems with trying to account for psychedelic experiences in those frameworks. As was seen in chapter 2, one approach to aesthetic experience posits that there is no such thing as an aesthetic experience because there are no properties internal to aesthetic experiences. In other words, since there does not appear to be any properties of aesthetic experience, then we cannot say that there is such a thing as aesthetic experience.

Obviously if there is no such thing as an aesthetic experience, then we cannot say that psychedelic experiences are one kind of aesthetic experience. However, a phenomenological approach that posits perception as active and embodied avoids looking at the causes of the experiences. In other words, if world and body are intertwined and perception is always active, then nothing is experienced as distinct from the experiencer. And so, a person cannot merely notice aesthetic properties in objects, at least not under an embodied phenomenological approach. As was seen, with a Merleau-Pontian view perception organizes itself as a unified field, and there is no such thing as a detached apprehension of properties. Instead, the psychedelic field organizes itself as a unified field of perception that a person is absorbed in (i.e. the psychedelic landscape).

Another problem I highlighted with aesthetic experience in chapter 2 had to do with cognitive approaches to aesthetic experience. These approaches generally posit aesthetic experience as involving some kind of evaluative component. This is problematic for psychedelic experiences given that psychedelic experiences so thoroughly alter cognition and can impair the ability to engage in evaluation. However, a process-oriented account that moves away from a focus on the cognition to instead look at embodied perception provides the tools for understanding why these experiences are valuable aesthetically. Psychedelic experiences might involve phenomenal contents that are illusive, unreliable and transitory, but these experiences can still be aesthetically valuable if we look at the process that a person engages in when having a psychedelic experience. Psychedelic experiences offer the opportunity to surrender in a particular context and are therefore valuable on their own terms.

Finally, whereas Dewey's process-oriented account of aesthetic experience as a consummatory experience was criticized on the basis that it doesn't adequately identify what it means to have a consummatory experience, psychedelic experiences can be readily differentiated by their phenomenal contents, and therefore it seems that there is a de facto reason to admit that psychedelic experiences are aesthetically consummatory. Yet, this does not explain how these experiences are valuable and instead leads right back to the question of assessing the importance of the transitory, illusive, and unreliable contents that psychedelic experiences are famous for. However, it is precisely the unreliability of the contents of these experiences that marks them out as unique and as especially conducive to a process-oriented account of surrender.

Overall, the embodied approach to psychedelic experience and psychedelic surrender that I provide still sees psychedelic surrender as connected to the realm of the aesthetic because psychedelic experiences are experiences that can be valuable without practical reasons to justify their value. At the same time, psychedelic surrender nudges the psychedelic away from the realm of aesthetic experience by suggesting that the benefits of these experiences have to do more with the process that they offer – as opposed to their contents. Psychedelic surrender allows those interested in psychedelic experiences to see the bond between psychedelic experiences and certain actions that make them valuable to those that have them.

4.7 Chapter 4 Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to assess the aesthetic value of psychedelic experience. Using an embodied phenomenological approach, I surfaced surrender as the

performative task of psychedelic experience. I argued that when achieved, surrender makes psychedelic experience aesthetically valuable. As discussed, psychedelic surrender happens in a context where the phenomenal contents are unreliable, illusive, and transitory, and psychedelic experiences are notable for the uniqueness of the psychedelic landscape. Yet, by using an embodied phenomenological framework, the focus shifted away from the phenomenal contents of the psychedelic experience to the process that a person engages when they surrender during a psychedelic experience. As such, this dissertation contributes to the field of psychedelic studies in philosophy by moving the discussion away from the phenomenal contents of psychedelic experiences to instead consider how these experiences are valuable based on the process of surrender.

Finally, as Patočka pointed out, the motivations behind an act of surrender can be relevant to its value. If a person surrenders to nothing in particular during a psychedelic experience, this exposes them to what it is like to let go in a context where there are no immediate benefits to that act of surrender. If what is missing in society is a focus on the non-instrumental value of human life, this research could also highlight the relevance of surrender to the broader goal of improving human experience by resisting social conditions that seek to reduce a person's worth to merely instrumental value.

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