

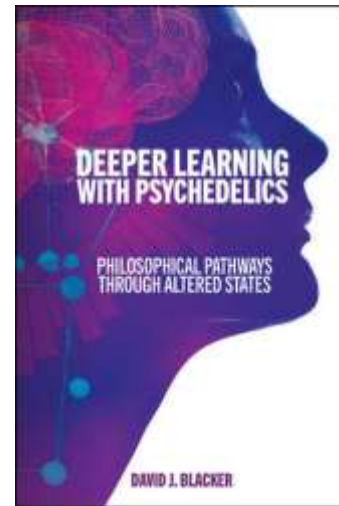
March 5, 2025

ISSN 1094-5296

Blacker, D. (2024). *Deeper learning with psychedelics*. State University of New York Press.

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I must begin this review of David Blacker's *Deeper Learning with Psychedelics: Philosophical Pathways Through Altered States* with a disclaimer. Before reading this book, I did not have any interest in psychedelics, let alone any experience or expertise. I was drawn to this book by my admiration for Blacker's previous books, particularly the two that most recently preceded it, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame* (Zero Books, 2013) and *What's Left of the World: Education, Identity and the Post-work Political Imagination* (Zero Books, 2019). On the surface, Blacker's exploration of psychedelic learning might seem like an incongruous shift. The two preceding books are a wake-up call for educators to confront the devastating effects of our present economic and environmental realities on schools. Instead of making the usual rousing pronouncements about what schools and teachers must *do* to address these problems, Blacker makes a counterintuitive case to recognize the constraints on schooling in the face of these existential challenges and focus activist attention elsewhere. This is not to say that he gives up on schools. For many young people, schools are one of the last remaining spaces of decency in a world in which people have been rendered increasingly "useless"¹ (Blacker 2013, pp. 28-29; Blacker, 2019, p. 17). Although the outrage that fueled Blacker's analysis of various educational orthodoxies has mellowed, *Deeper Learning with Psychedelics* offers a similarly counterintuitive take on psychedelic orthodoxies. The book is a skeptical yet sympathetic analysis of a seemingly niche question: are psychedelics educational? Just as the earlier books make a case for ratcheting down our expectation of schools, *Deeper Learning* brings the heightened educational aspirations of the psychedelic community down to earth. We might think of this book as an exploration of the educational (im)potential of psychedelics in the sense that it releases psychedelic experiences from the idea that an educational pay-off will somehow redeem them (Lewis, 2018, Chap. 1). This is not to say that psychedelics are not educationally significant, but their contribution is less seismic than psychedelic proponents might



¹ Blacker borrows the devastating concept of the new "useless class" from [Yuval Noah Harari](#).

think. The transformative capacity of psychedelics is delimited by the various *ideational envelopments* that shape the experience as well as the degree to which insights from the psychedelic experience carry over into the lives of would-be psychedelic students (p. 154). Blacker writes: “Sorry to be a psychedelic scold, but *one must still do one’s homework*” (p. 53).

On the surface, the title of the book implies that psychedelics have the capacity to deepen our understanding the world, and there is some truth to this, as when Blacker describes the wonder at the small things that most people would not ordinarily notice were it not for the effects of psychedelics: “I *might* attend again to what I’m supposed to – just as soon as I spend a *bit* more time with that roaring little dandelion by the back fence that has with such great courtesy just invited me to go inside it. Like the still life can do with such subtlety, psychedelics can disclose infinities right in front of us” (p. 95). One might also be sufficiently moved by the experience to rearrange one’s priorities (p. 206). But the deeper learning in question is also the work that psychedelic advocates need to undertake in relation to the question of what it is that psychedelics “teach” and how these lessons are learned. In this regard, *Deeper Learning* is something of an outlier in the field of psychedelic studies: less advocacy than invitation to think *educationally* about psychedelics.

To make sense of what might be educational about the psychedelic experience, Blacker deftly pulls from a disparate array of key figures in the Western philosophical canon: Plato, Martin Heidegger, Rene Descartes, Edmund Husserl, David Hume and Hans-Georg Gadamer, among others. These are grouped into four tightly thematized and remarkably accessible philosophical pathways into the educational dimensions of the psychedelic journey, from the initial merger of the self with psychedelic chemicals that occasions the “epistemic loosening” of a trip, to the more difficult questions about what happens next. Blacker’s philosophical approach offers an alternative to the hegemony of the biological and psychological sciences in the fields of psychedelic studies as well as education.² Given how steeped in indigenous philosophical and spiritual traditions the field of psychedelic studies has traditionally been, it is also significant that Blacker’s book is rooted in the Western philosophical tradition. This is not because the Western philosophical tradition is superior to these traditions, but because it reflects the cultural frame within and against which psychedelics take effect. There’s a certain irony in looking for guidance in a tradition that is in some ways responsible for the situation in which we find ourselves: alienated, overly rational, and atomized - in other words, the very conditions that give psychedelics their appeal as an entryway into alternative modes of existence. But one of many pleasures of the text is Blacker’s attunement to the countertraditions and dialogical undercurrents within this tradition.

Heidegger’s “turn” in relation to the question of technology is a case in point. Psychedelics are sometimes described as ‘reality switch technologies’ that enable users to experience altered states (p. 68). They ‘stack the odds’ in favor of reaching alternate sense of reality, which sets users in something of a bind because they also need to give themselves over to the technology in order to take – or be taken on – a

² Masschelein and Simons (2012) offer a succinct overview of the problem of psychologization in education (pp. 106-107).

trip (p. 80). Heidegger's early and later work speaks to this tension between using technology to aid understanding and being at the mercy of technologies that distort and foreclose meaning (p. 86). Another example of a dialogic undercurrent can be found on the other side of Cartesian doubt, which is something we don't hear much about in potted accounts of Descartes's philosophy. Blacker draws attention to Descartes's concerns about the need to keep doubt within bounds so that the rug is not completely swept up from under our feet (pp. 124-126). The doubt, or "epistemic loosening" induced by psychedelics needs to be similarly bounded, which is why things like dosage, frequency of use, and post-trip reintegration matter (p. 125). As Blacker puts this, "life is to be lived on the *rebound* from the moment of doubt" (p. 134). Similarly, he finds Hume's reconceptualization of the relationship between reason and the passions important for understanding both the fluid emotions of a self in altered states and the need to make sense of the "great blooming, buzzing confusion" of sense impressions, ideas, half-ideas, images, inarticulate feelings, etc, that have been provided on a significant trip journey" (p. 222). The trip itself and the subsequent sense-making should "both be considered part of a single process of potential deeper learning" (p. 223).

So, what is "the psychedelic lesson plan" (p. 30)? Early on, Blacker makes clear his alignment with the idea, put forward by psychedelic researcher, Stanislav Grof, that psychedelics "do not contain any determinative message or specific teaching" (p. 52). The Grofian thesis shifts the focus from content to process, although this is both an escape and a worry. If psychedelics do not impart or, more accurately, make it possible for participants to *yield* to the kinds of message commonly associated with these substances – unity with the earth, oneness with the universe, etc. – it means that participants have recourse only to what is already within them. In some cases, this might be a rich store of cultural and educational experiences, in which case, there is potentially already something substantive for the psychedelic to switch on or amplify. In other cases, there may not be much to work with aside from cultural clichés – including familiar psychedelic images – that are simply confirmed rather than transformed by the experience. And of course, there is also the seamier side of psychedelic communities, which are not all peace, love, and happiness. One need only recall the Manson family, but we learn also about neo-Nazi psychedelic aficionados whose belief systems are more likely to be reinforced than challenged. As Blacker explains, psychedelics are a "world-view accelerant" and not an independent bestower of meaning. He gives us two additional terms for this problematic in two fascinating chapters on each topic: *hypertrophic identification*, which is a thickening of already existing affinities, and *doxastic enhancements*, which is the idea that beliefs are more likely to be reinforced than fundamentally challenged. In other words, a community of Christian monks is more likely to meet Jesus on a trip than the Prophet Muhammad. This is not to say that there isn't a value to deepening already existing beliefs, but given the likelihood that psychedelics will enhance existing beliefs rather than challenge or broaden them, it is all the more important to shift our attention from the chemistry of psychedelic substances to the socio-cultural substrate of the various *psychedelic envelopments* that shape what practitioners bring to and expect from their experiences. This shift in focus is one part of 'doing one's homework' (p. 43).

The other part of “doing one’s homework” is the work on the self that is needed to bring oneself into alignment with new insights after a psychedelic experience. Although these new insights are more likely to be a matter of rearranging what is already known rather than a matter of assimilating entirely new information, attending to what one has noticed or begun to care about differently as a result of the psychedelic experience is key to the ‘deeper learning’ of the title (p. 207). Although this isn’t an argument that Blacker overtly makes, there is perhaps an educational opportunity here. At various points in the book, he reflects on how similar the experiences of psychonauts are in the trip reports they write up and how prefigured the language of recreational users tends to be. Participants often use the same phrases to describe their experiences. There is also a sameness in the descriptions of the images and entities they encounter even though the trip feels utterly unique and particular to the person who experienced it (p. 89). Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological account is helpful here, because the subjective dimension of the experience warrants attention, even or particularly when it is inchoate, as it often is. (p. 136). As Blacker puts it: even when Descartes says, “I think therefore I am,” the salient point is that it is *I* who is doing the thinking (p. 137). At the same time, psychedelic participants may not recognize the educational potential of seemingly mundane experiences of the “whoa, dude, look at that ceiling fan” variety (p. 93). This constituency may have the most to glean from Blacker’s levelheaded analysis of the educational (im)potential of psychedelics. The work of meaning making is not only cultural but individual and personal: “Psychedelics do not so much *give* us insight as they many *allow* insight to occur; they may help us reach for meaning but they do not themselves provide it” (p. 55). Indeed, the challenges of making sense of these experiences undergirds an entire industry of guides of one sort or another: trained psychedelic therapists, licensed shamanic guides, scientists and in the wings perhaps, educationists and philosophical counselors who are interested in the existential dimensions of psychedelic use. These are unlikely to be of interest to the many investors who are presently poised to profit from a nascent and well-funded psychedelic-industrial complex that by all accounts is about to explode but it does put us in a potentially interesting position. It opens space for educationists to enter the sphere in the way that Blacker has through this book, with the right epistemic humility for the kinds of conversation we ought to be having about the educational (im)potential of psychedelics.

None of this is to suggest that recreational users are waiting for educational explication or that psychedelic experiences need to be somehow redeemed through educational understanding. *Deeper Learning with Psychedelics* is a powerful critique of the instrumentalization of psychedelics and indeed, of education itself and Blacker is not so much of a psychedelic scold that he dismisses the value of psychedelic experiences in and of themselves. Some of the most beautiful passages in the book speak to the capacity of psychedelics to offer participants access to worlds within the world that they might otherwise miss. Instead of regarding psychedelics as an escape from reality, Blacker sees them as a way of focusing attention on the mysteries within the mundane: “Like the still life can do with such subtlety, psychedelics can disclose infinities right in front of us” (p. 95). Heightened attention to the things of this world is a significant educational value, but even if psychedelics prove not to be as transformative as proponents might hope, Blacker is no killjoy. He makes it clear

that psychedelic experiences can be worthwhile for their own sake, just as many other experiences are valuable in and of themselves.

Blacker concludes by reminding readers that “it is also possible ... that one may need to try less hard and resist the impulse to need to gain something useful out of the experience; one may need to think less deeply about it and simply enjoy it” (p. 244). There is some hedging here on the question of just what is meant by the educational dimension of psychedelics. Sometimes, psychedelic experiences will be manifestly life enhancing, even if they are not seismically transformative, but sometimes, the experience will be a mystery, which is something of a lesson in itself about all that must remain beyond our reach (p. 235). If we are in for an educational experience either way, the question of what is educational about psychedelics also needs to be answered in the negative. Blacker does tell us when psychedelics are “non-, mis-, or mal-educative” (p. 77), but the distinction between an educational psychedelic experience and a psychedelic experience that is worthwhile yet not educational is harder to define (p. 243). It seems to have to do with not expecting anything in particular to happen so that one can just have an authentic experience, but it also seems to be the case that precisely when recreational users give themselves over to the experience, the worlds within the world are likely to reveal themselves. It’s probably best not to be presumptuous about this. Education is one of a range of worthwhile human activities, and it may not be the one that sheds most light on the psychedelic experience or vice versa. Perhaps the educational encounter with psychedelics is an occasion for much needed educational humility.

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