

James's Encounter with Mescal, Mescaline, and Peyote

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T rue to his sympathetic and adventuresome nature, William James describes an episode in a letter dated June 11, 1896, to his brother, Henry James:

We have let our little place [in Chocorua, N.H.], our tenant arrives the day after tomorrow, and Alice and I and Tweedie have been here a week enjoying it and cleaning house and place. She has worked like a beaver. I had two days spoiled by a psychological experiment with *mescal*, an intoxicant used by some of our Southwestern Indians in their religious ceremonies, a sort of cactus bud, of which the U. S. Government had distributed a supply to certain medical men, including Weir Mitchell who sent me some to try. He had himself been "in fairyland." It gives the most glorious visions of color—every object thought of appears in a jeweled splendor unknown to the natural world. It disturbs the stomach somewhat, but that, according to W. M., was a cheap price, etc. I took one bud three days ago, was violently sick for 24 hours, and had no other symptom whatever

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except that and the *Katzenjammer* [a severe headache resulting from a hangover] the following day. I will take the visions on trust.¹

What James took was probably not mescal, but peyote. Mescal is a liquor distilled from the *Agave americana* plant, a succulent commonly referred to as the century plant. Mescal is usually eighty proof (40% alcohol), which is low for most spirits. Peyote, on the other hand, is made with mescaline, a psychoactive or hallucinogenic alkaloid from a small, spineless cactus (*Lophophora williamsii* or *Lophophora diffusa*) resembling a bud. The cacti grow on top of one another, forming a small blueish-green colony, and they are one of the beauties found in the desert. When they are processed, they form either a powder-like substance or a tobacco-like substance. So by “mescal,” James meant “mescaline.” Drinking mescal would not sicken a person for two days—even in fairly large amount—but ingesting peyote certainly could! Peyote is a concentrated substance which in very small amounts could easily produce the effects that James describes, and Mitchell had experienced and reported to James.² Given his longstanding interest in psychical research, James would have clearly been interested in mescaline phenomena.

After James and Mitchell, some philosophers, psychologists, and medical doctors studied mescaline phenomena. For example, in *The Problems of Perception*,³ R. J. Hirst explains: “drugs like mescaline will make objects seem to have brilliant colours and bizarre shapes.” In detail, he continues:

They [mescaline phenomena] appear to be of two kinds: the first is where the subject, with his eyes open, sees external objects with unusual characteristics. Their colours look more brilliant or their shapes vary, so that the carpet may appear to undulate or the lighted cigarette may appear multiplied The second kind of phenomenon consists of extremely vivid and attractive imagery, normally seen with the eyes shut; and here again there is no hallucination since

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the visions are clearly recognized as mental images and are not confused with real things.⁴

So peyote is one more “wild beast of the philosophic desert.”⁵ Because of it, the Southwestern Indians have a wider self than James’s “CAN-do list.”⁶ This wider self in Southwestern Indian thought included a certain wildness in their experiences that is missing in James’s list and its account.⁷ Perhaps it is missing because of the experience he had with mescaline in whatever form it was.⁸

Much later, James compared drug-induced experiences to experiences in newborn babies, men in a semi-coma from sleep, illnesses, or blows, which he called pure experiences.⁹ Another experiment, unlike the one with mescaline, which James had, came in the form of a gas. The results were written up in “On Some Hegelisms.”¹⁰ This essay contains an appended note in which the Hegelian identification of opposites is compared with the experience of nitrous oxide gas intoxication.¹¹

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NOTES

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¹ *The Selected Letters of William James*, edited by Elizabeth Hardwick (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1960), 154; his italics.

² S. Weir Mitchell, MD (1829-1914), lived in Philadelphia, is considered the father of medical neurology and an early pioneer in scientific medicine. His correspondence with James is available on SNAC (Social Networks and Archival Context): snaccooperative.org/ark:99166/w6rb7480, under Relationships link. No known correspondence with Arthur Heffter (1859-1925), who lived in Leipzig, Germany, and who was experimenting (on himself!) with mescaline at the time.

³ R. J. Hirst, *The Problems of Perception* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1957), 20.

⁴ Hirst, *The Problems of Perception*, 43.

⁵ James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), 303.

⁶ James, *The Principles of Psychology* Vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), 291; his emphasis. Most items on this list are possessions or were thought of as possessions. The question is *how* are they possessed? Just materially as objects or spiritually as subjects? The list includes his wife and children, but also his land, horses, yacht, and bank account. Another question is how wide is too wide? Some would say the last two items take us too far.

⁷ Studies of The Native American Church (NAC) have been made. NAC is also known as the Peyote Religion which has sacramental use of the entheogen peyote. NAC originated in the Oklahoma Territory (1890-1907) and its influential people include Quanah Parker, a chief of the Comanches, and Victor Griffin, the last chief of the Quapaw Tribe, among others, who helped spread

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NAC. N. Scott Momaday has a description of the sacramental use of peyote in his novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968).

⁸ It sounds like James took the cactus bud unprocessed which would have the mescaline less concentrated. Ingesting the plant, because of its bitter taste, it is usually dried, then chewed or smoked, and it is also soaked and made into a liquid and consumed as a tea. For further discussion, see Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954) which is a classic that dwells on his personal experience with mescaline; also, E. F. Anderson, *The Divine Cactus* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), and more recently, B. C. Labate and C. Cavnar, eds., *Peyote: History, Tradition, Politics, and Conservation* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishing, 2016), and Mitchell Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018). See chapter 3 of Pollan's monograph for a recent survey of the history of early psychedelic research.

⁹ James, "The Thing and Its Relations" (1905), *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1912), 92.

¹⁰ *Mind* 7 (April 1882): 186-208.

¹¹ This Note and the essay are reprinted in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), edited by Steven Schroeder (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 229-34 for the Note. The experiment with the gas James says "made me understand better than ever before both the strength and weakness of Hegel's philosophy" (229-30). He urges others to repeat the experiment in order to experience "the tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination" (230), which in Hegelianism leads to indifferentism (234).