“Emerging Ethical Issues in Psychedelic Research” with Ben Lewis, MD

Thursday, June 11, 2020
5:30pm-7:00pm

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We are experiencing a renaissance in the scientific study of psychedelics. A prolonged political and social moratorium on the scientific and psychotherapeutic study of this class of compounds is recently lifting, resulting in a dramatic upsurge in clinical research. Recent work in psychiatry - while involving small studies and limited control groups - has nonetheless been remarkably promising with large magnitude therapeutic effects after even single drug administrations, particularly for existential distress or anxiety in cancer patients (Griffiths et al 2016, Ross et al 2016, Grab et al 2011), smoking cessation (Bogenschutz et al 2015, Johnson et al 2014, 2017), treatment-resistant depression (Osorio et al 2015), alcohol use disorder (Krebs and Johansen, 2012) and OCD (Moreno et al 2006). These emerging treatments raise a number of ethical questions. For instance, how ought we to think about the relative importance prior personal experience with psychedelics holds for psychedelically-assisted psychotherapists? And what issues are at stake with any kind of disclosures in this regard given current legal status? What issues arise in thinking through the possible harms of psychedelic tourism - i.e. the flocking of Westerners to S. America for ayahuasca ceremonies? Are there ethical ramifications at stake in the medicalization of this class of compounds, particularly in light of indigenous cultural use and/or the ways in which this set of treatments may interface with Big Pharma?

In this presentation Ben Lewis, MD, will briefly survey some of these questions but will devote the majority of his time to discussing what might be termed ‘epistemic risks’ at stake with the therapeutic use of psychedelics. Michael Pollan alludes to this set of concerns in his recent book How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence.” It’s one thing to conclude that love is all that matters, but quite another to come away from a therapy convinced that “there is another reality” awaiting us after death … or that there is more to the universe—and to consciousness—than a purely materialist world view would have us believe. Is psychedelic therapy simply foisting a comforting delusion on the sick and dying? “(Pollan 2015). The worry here is that mystical experiences are- in some sense-spooky and if mystical experience is involved in the causal chain for therapeutic change (as suggested by recent clinical research) there is a risk of violating our commitments to naturalism, or inducing non-naturalistic belief states that may carry unintended harms. This possible ‘Pascal’s Wager’ with psychedelic administration has a host of implications, ethical and otherwise, particularly in the context of vulnerable populations.


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