

Commentary

The Ontological Tourism Problem in Psychedelic Science

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Abstract

The nature of the psychedelic experience, and the distinctive phenomenological features it generates, leaves it susceptible to an unresolved epistemological tension between first-person phenomenological reports and claims about the fundamental nature of consciousness and reality. This tension is examined through the concept of ontological tourism: the practice of treating phenomenological data as sufficient grounds for ontological conclusions without adequate engagement with alternative mechanistic explanations or the philosophical requirements that such inferences demand. This practice, absent adequate epistemic scaffolding, poses a genuine threat to scientific integrity and clinical ethics. At the same time, reflexively dismissing phenomenological data as mere pharmacological artifacts represents an equally impoverished position. The tourist analogy cuts both ways: the tourist may be an unreliable cartographer, but the tourist has been somewhere. An alternative stance is proposed, one that takes subjective experience seriously as a form of evidence without overclaiming its metaphysical implications or dismissing its epistemic weight, along with a framework for achieving it. Ontological tourism risks bypassing the explanatory work that makes psychedelic phenomenology valuable to consciousness science.

Keywords: psychedelics; phenomenology; consciousness; ontology; epistemology

1. Introduction

Recent advances in psychedelic science have generated renewed interest not only in the therapeutic potential of psychedelic compounds but also in the subjective phenomenological features of the experience [1–7]. As therapeutic outcomes, neural mechanisms, and theoretical models have become subjects of increasingly rigorous investigation, so too have the subjective experiences occasioned by these substances. Experiences of ego dissolution, noetic insight, entity encounter, transcendence, familiarity, and apparent encounters [4,7,8] with alternative modes of consciousness have moved from anecdotal reports to systematic objects of scientific and philosophical inquiry [9–13].

With that success has come a set of interpretive habits that deserve scrutiny. Central among these is what is identified here as “ontological tourism:” the practice, sometimes explicit, but more often implicit, of using first-person phenomenological reports as evidence for claims about the fundamental nature of consciousness, reality, selfhood, and death. We argue that this move is epistemically premature when conducted without adequate justification. We also argue, with equal conviction, that the opposite error, the rou-

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tine dismissal of phenomenological data as pharmacological noise or an epiphenomenal byproduct, is scientifically unproductive and increasingly untenable.

The evidential status of first-person reports in psychedelic research has been addressed with increasing rigor in the philosophical and scientific literature. It has been argued that psychedelic states can constitute genuine epistemic benefits, producing knowledge and insight, even under a naturalistic framework that makes no recourse to metaphysical claims [14]. Independently, a neurophenomenological approach [15] and its recent psychedelic applications [10] provide a formal methodological architecture for integrating first-person phenomenological data with third-person neurophysiological measurement [16–21]. These frameworks suggest that dismissing psychedelic phenomenology as mere artifact is not epistemically defensible. Rather than a binary choice between credulity and dismissal, the field requires more sophisticated tools for evaluating the significance and implications of psychedelic phenomenology. Although the examples and literature discussed here focus primarily on classic serotonergic psychedelics, the underlying epistemic considerations are not necessarily limited to these compounds. Similar interpretive challenges may arise in other altered states of consciousness capable of generating compelling phenomenological experiences, although the applicability of the present framework beyond classic psychedelics remains an important question for future investigation.

The question is not whether phenomenological reports constitute evidence, but what kind of evidence they represent and what conclusions they can legitimately support. The question is: evidence of what, exactly? And how do we reason from them responsibly?

An ontological claim, in contrast to a phenomenological experience, refers to an assertion about the nature of reality that extends beyond the description of subjective experience itself [22]. This distinction is important because certain phenomenological reports of psychedelic experiences carry strong ontological implications [22,23]. Subjects may describe encountering apparently autonomous entities [24,25], revisiting a place that feels familiar despite never having encountered it before, accessing a state that appears to exist prior to birth or beyond death, or experiencing a form of consciousness that seems more fundamental than ordinary waking awareness [3,4]. These reports constitute phenomenological observations: descriptions of what subjects experienced. The ontological claim arises when one moves from the description of the experience to a conclusion about reality itself. “I experienced entities” differs from “the entities were independently existing beings.” “The experience felt familiar” differs from “the familiarity reflects genuine access to a pre-birth or post-death state.” “The experience felt more real than ordinary consciousness” differs from “the experience revealed a deeper layer of reality.”

This distinction is epistemically significant. Phenomenological reports can be studied empirically, assessed for reliability, compared across cultures, and related to psychological and neurobiological mechanisms [2–4,6,26]. Ontological claims require an additional inferential step. They concern what exists, what consciousness is, and how reality is structured independently of any individual subject’s experience.

The issue is not ontological inquiry itself. These are among the most profound questions humans have ever asked. Nor is the problem that psychedelic experiences may motivate ontological reflection. They often do. The field is vulnerable to an interpretive error when phenomenological observations are treated as constituting direct evidence for ontological conclusions without acknowledging the inferential gap being crossed. This gap does not render ontological speculation illegitimate. It merely requires that the transition from phenomenology to ontology be made explicitly and defended on philosophical as well as empirical grounds, where possible.

Ontological tourism is defined as the inferential move by which phenomenological observations are treated as evidentially sufficient to establish ontological conclusions. It is

not simply a cognitive bias, but an interpretive epistemic error concerning the relationship between phenomenological evidence and ontological inference. Individuals may experience noetic certainty, undergo enduring changes in metaphysical beliefs, or revise their worldview. Such experiences may legitimately motivate ontological reflection or hypothesis generation. Ontological tourism arises only when the phenomenology is treated as establishing claims about the fundamental nature of reality in the absence of independent justification. Accordingly, the focus is less on adjudicating ontological claims than on the standards by which they should be justified.

2. When Does Phenomenology Justify Ontological Inference?

Indeed, phenomenological observations have historically motivated some of the most influential ontological proposals in the philosophy of mind. The existence of subjective experience itself has been invoked in support of positions as diverse as materialism, dual-aspect monism, panpsychism, neutral monism, and analytic idealism [27,28]. Phenomenology can clearly contribute to ontology. The challenge is determining under what conditions those contributions become justified. Scientific theories routinely extend beyond direct observation; the problem, then, is not ontological speculation [29,30]. The problem is ontological short-circuiting: the tendency to treat phenomenological observations as if they directly settle ontological questions without the intervening work of theory construction, justification, and critical evaluation.

The psychedelic-evoked familiarity phenomenon reported during psychedelic experiences provides an instructive case study because it occupies a particularly unstable position between phenomenological description and ontological interpretation [3]. Subjects frequently describe encountering places, entities, states of consciousness, or modes of existence that feel profoundly familiar despite being unable to identify any prior encounter that would explain the feeling [3]. The familiarity often appears detached from autobiographical memory, giving rise to what has been described as “recognition without referent.” This is a genuine phenomenological puzzle. The reports suggest the presence of a powerful recognition signal in the apparent absence of a retrievable source. The phenomenon becomes especially interesting when familiarity is directed not merely toward specific features within the experiential environment, but toward apparently transcendent features of the experience itself: a sense of homecoming, return, timelessness, pre-existence, post-mortem existence, or contact with a state that feels more fundamental than ordinary waking consciousness [3].

The interpretive challenge emerges when one attempts to explain this familiarity. At least two broad explanatory frameworks have been proposed [3]. Nonveridical accounts propose that psychedelic neuropharmacology generates a familiarity signal that is misattributed to features of the experience, i.e., a phenomenological byproduct [3]. Veridical accounts propose that the familiarity reflects genuine contact with something previously encountered, whether understood in psychological, metaphysical, or ontological terms [3]. The distinction between these possibilities is substantial, yet discussions in the literature often move rapidly from describing the phenomenon to entertaining both explanatory frameworks without specifying what evidence would be required to adjudicate between them. It is precisely within this inferential space that the risk of ontological tourism arises. The distinction between veridical and nonveridical interpretations of the psychedelic familiarity phenomenon serves here as an illustrative case study of this broader methodological challenge, rather than as evidence for either position [3]. The phenomenological observation itself is uncontroversial: subjects report familiarity. The ontological claim enters when the familiarity is interpreted as evidence that the subject has genuinely returned to a previously encountered state, place, mode of consciousness, or reality. The

fact that an experience feels familiar does not, by itself, establish the source of that familiarity.

To be clear, the existence of mechanistic neurophysiological explanations for an experience does not establish that ontological interpretations are false. Nor does the persistence of unexplained features establish that ontological interpretations are correct. The point is simply that the methods typically employed in psychedelic phenomenology cannot adjudicate between these possibilities.

3. The Convergence Argument

One common approach in psychedelic research is to examine the convergence of phenomenological features across subjects, substances, and experiential contexts [3,6,23,31]. The underlying intuition is that recurring experiential patterns may be more than incidental products of neuropharmacology or expectation and instead point toward some common underlying structure or phenomenon. This interpretation is more sophisticated than a simple appeal to anecdote and warrants serious engagement rather than outright dismissal.

Phenomenological convergence alone does not uniquely support an ontological interpretation. One alternative interpretation is that convergent experiences reflect reproducible neuropharmacology acting upon convergent neural architecture. For example, classic psychedelics primarily exert their effects through agonism at the serotonin 5-HT_{2A} receptor, producing reproducible alterations in large-scale brain dynamics, functional connectivity, and information processing. Contemporary models suggest that these effects reduce the influence of higher-level priors and top-down constraints on perception and cognition, contributing to the profound alterations in perception, self-experience, and conscious awareness characteristic of psychedelic states [16,18,32–34]. These neurobiological effects are not infinitely variable and may constrain the range of phenomenological experiences that emerge under psychedelic states.

A second interpretation locates the source of convergence in priming, cultural transmission, expectancy, and shared interpretive frameworks [35,36]. Individuals arrive at psychedelic experiences having absorbed varying degrees of prior information regarding the themes, expectations, and interpretive frameworks commonly associated with psychedelic states. Cultural scripting may help explain how experiences are elaborated and interpreted, but it appears less capable of explaining why the familiarity phenomenon emerges in the first place.

Both neuropharmacological and priming effects offer plausible explanations for aspects of the convergence phenomenon. Yet, even taken together, they do not fully resolve the central explanatory challenge. The challenge is not merely identifying the neurobiological conditions under which psychedelic experiences occur, but explaining how those conditions give rise to the specific structure and content of the experiences themselves.

Serotonergic psychedelics produce increasingly well-characterized and reproducible alterations in neural activity, receptor signaling, and large-scale brain dynamics [16,19,32,34]. Yet the transition from these neuropharmacological processes to the recurring phenomenology of homecoming, familiarity, entity encounter, timelessness, and apparent transcendence remains incompletely understood. To be sure, many psychedelic experiences are characterized by confusion, uncertainty, perceptual fragmentation, disorientation, or existential distress [37]. The phenomenology is neither uniform nor universally positive. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of subjects, including many with little or no prior psychedelic experience, report remarkably consistent experiences [2]. Given the enormous range of experiences that might emerge from large-scale alterations in brain function, the recurrence of these particular phenomenological themes remains noteworthy. Why should a particular pattern of neuropharmacological activity be experienced as

recognition rather than uncertainty, homecoming rather than disorientation, or meaningful structure and order rather than randomness?

The difficulty of interpreting recurrent subjective experiences is not unique to psychedelic science. For over a century, the academic study of religion has grappled with the analogous question of how mystical, religious, and spiritual experiences should be interpreted, distinguishing phenomenological description from metaphysical or theological inference [38–40]. Early psychology of religion observed that mystical experiences possess a noetic quality (i.e., a compelling sense of authoritative insight) while cautioning that such experiences are authoritative primarily for the experiencer and do not, by themselves, constitute public evidence [38,41]. The perennialist tradition interpreted cross-cultural convergence in mystical phenomenology as evidence of a common underlying reality [42], whereas constructivist accounts argued that experience is invariably shaped by prior concepts, expectations, and cultural traditions [43]. This debate closely parallels the veridical and priming interpretations of psychedelic convergence discussed above [3].

Related methodological frameworks distinguish between descriptive reduction, which illegitimately redescribes an experience in terms the subject would reject, and explanatory reduction, which seeks to explain an experience without requiring the subject's endorsement [39]. From this perspective, dismissing psychedelic experiences as mere pharmacological artifacts risks descriptive reduction, whereas neurobiological accounts represent legitimate explanatory reduction. More recent attributional approaches similarly emphasize how experiences come to be interpreted as mystical, spiritual, or revelatory while bracketing questions of their ultimate metaphysical status [40]. Likewise, mystical experiences may provide *prima facie* justification for the experiencer without constituting publicly compelling evidence for others [41], underscoring the distinction between personal conviction and shared epistemic warrant.

Rather than resolving these longstanding debates, the present framework extends their central methodological insight to psychedelic science: compelling phenomenology warrants careful description and explanation but does not, on its own, justify ontological inference. Ontological tourism constitutes a distinct interpretive error within this landscape by preserving fidelity to the participant's account while assigning it greater evidential weight than it can independently bear. The experience is treated not merely as psychologically transformative or phenomenologically compelling, but as sufficient evidence for metaphysical conclusions that require independent corroboration. Accordingly, contemporary approaches recommend epistemic humility, recognizing that profound subjective certainty, even when accompanied by lasting transformation, does not eliminate the need for independent justification when making claims about objective reality [39–41]. Psychedelic experiences may therefore be understood as psychologically, phenomenologically, and potentially epistemically significant, while their ontological implications remain open to interdisciplinary investigation.

4. Illusion, False Belief, and Ontological Shock

Psychedelic experiences present a distinctive epistemic challenge because they are simultaneously associated with profound conviction and demonstrable susceptibility to illusion: experiences may be simultaneously meaningful, transformative, and misleading [44].

Subjects frequently emerge from psychedelic states reporting that they have encountered truths that appear self-evident, undeniable, and more real than ordinary waking experience [7,23]. This noetic quality, repeatedly documented in contemporary psychedelic research [45,46], is among the most striking features of these states. Yet conviction alone cannot function as a criterion of truth. The history of human cognition is replete with experiences that feel unquestionably real while later proving false, incomplete, or

misinterpreted [47,48]. Subjective certainty and objective accuracy are not equivalent, and the intensity of an experience does not, by itself, establish the validity of the conclusions subsequently drawn from it.

This concern is particularly relevant to psychedelic states because they appear capable of producing both genuine insight and genuine error [44,49]. Individuals may report meaningful autobiographical realizations, increased psychological flexibility, or enduring therapeutic benefits while simultaneously endorsing beliefs that range from speculative to demonstrably false [49]. Experiences of communicating with autonomous entities, receiving cosmic revelations, discovering hidden conspiracies, recovering unverifiable memories, or acquiring privileged metaphysical knowledge illustrate the spectrum of claims that may emerge [22,44,46,50–53]. This raises an important possibility: psychedelic phenomenology may be epistemically productive without being epistemically reliable [50]. The capacity to generate insight does not guarantee the accuracy of every interpretation attached to that insight.

A useful framework is the concept of epistemic innocence, which proposes that certain unusual cognitive states may confer genuine epistemic benefits despite containing elements that are false, distorted, or unverifiable [14,54]. Such states may promote self-understanding, emotional processing, or psychological flexibility even when the beliefs they generate are not literally true. If psychedelic experiences operate in this manner, their value need not depend on the accuracy of the metaphysical conclusions subjects derive from them.

A related consideration concerns the impact that unusual experiences can have on an individual's broader worldview [22]. Psychedelic experiences frequently challenge deeply held assumptions regarding reality, consciousness, selfhood, causation, and existence itself [20,22]. Such experiences may occasion ontological shock: the destabilization that occurs when an experience appears fundamentally incompatible with a person's existing explanatory framework [22].

Importantly, ontological shock is not evidence that a new ontology has been discovered [22,50]. Rather, it is evidence that an existing ontology has been challenged. The intensity of surprise, conviction, or transformative impact generated by an experience does not determine the truth value of the conclusions subsequently drawn from it. A worldview may be disrupted by genuine discovery, cognitive error, perceptual distortion, conceptual limitation, or some combination thereof. Consequently, ontological shock cannot function as evidence for any particular metaphysical position. What it demonstrates is a mismatch between experience and prior understanding [22,50].

From this perspective, psychedelic experiences may be most informative not because they reveal definitive ontological truths, but because they expose the limits of current explanatory models. Their epistemic significance may reside less in the answers they provide than in the questions they force us to confront.

5. Why Ontological Tourism Matters

In recent years, the psychedelic field has increasingly been characterized by methodological rigor, including randomized controlled trials, neuroimaging studies, validated outcome measures, pre-registration, and growing attention to reproducibility [55]. These developments have helped establish psychedelic science as a legitimate area of inquiry within mainstream clinical and neuroscientific research.

As interest expands beyond therapeutic outcomes to questions concerning consciousness, meaning, and reality, the interpretive standards applied to phenomenological findings become increasingly important [9,12]. Ontological tourism, as defined here, risks blurring the distinction between what has been observed, what has been inferred, and what remains speculative. The issue is not that ontological interpretations are inherently

illegitimate, but that the inferential steps connecting phenomenological observations to ontological conclusions are often left insufficiently articulated. Greater clarity regarding these distinctions is likely to strengthen, rather than constrain, the field's long-term scientific and philosophical development. The importance of these distinctions extends beyond scientific interpretation and into clinical practice. Many individuals undergoing psychedelic-assisted therapy are seeking relief from conditions that have resisted conventional treatment, often under circumstances of heightened emotional openness and vulnerability [1,56,57]. Because psychedelic experiences can be both profoundly meaningful and psychologically destabilizing, how those experiences are interpreted may influence their lasting impact [58].

From a clinical perspective, the present framework does not imply that therapists should discourage ontological reflection or challenge patients' metaphysical interpretations. Rather, it suggests maintaining therapeutic neutrality with respect to ontological claims while supporting exploration of the personal meaning, emotional significance, and psychological consequences of the experience [59–61]. The role of the therapist is therefore not to adjudicate metaphysical truth, but to facilitate integration without inadvertently reinforcing or dismissing ontological conclusions that extend beyond the available evidence.

These considerations extend beyond clinical practice and into consciousness research itself. Questions concerning the neural correlates of consciousness, the hard problem, and the nature of non-ordinary modes of awareness remain among the most significant unresolved issues in contemporary science [9,27]. Psychedelic research has genuine potential to contribute to these debates by linking reproducible alterations in brain function with reproducible alterations in subjective experience [9,12]. The REBUS model [34], complex systems approaches to psychedelic brain action [62], and contemporary neurophenomenology [49] all represent attempts to integrate phenomenological observations with theoretical neuroscience in empirically tractable ways.

This contribution is weakened when psychedelic phenomenology is treated not as a phenomenon requiring explanation, but as evidence that a particular ontological position is already correct. Rather, psychedelic phenomenology should be viewed as a source of observations capable of constraining and informing these ontological theories, rather than as immediate evidence for any particular metaphysical conclusion. Ontological tourism bypasses precisely the explanatory work that makes psychedelic research potentially valuable to the science of consciousness.

6. The Epistemic Contribution of Psychedelic Phenomenology

Critiques of ontological inference from psychedelic phenomenology must be balanced against an opposing risk: treating phenomenological observations as epistemically uninformative or reducing them to mere by-products of altered brain function.

A tourist visiting a foreign country cannot, on the basis of that visit alone, make authoritative claims about the country's political landscape, its economy, its history, international policy, or whether the territory traversed represents the whole of the nation. However, the tourist analogy should not be interpreted as implying that nothing was encountered or that the experience lacked significance. The tourist returns with genuine impressions, likely imperfectly encoded, culturally filtered, and narratively elaborated. They are evidence of contact, however partial and possibly distorted, with a genuine phenomenon requiring explanation. The question is not whether the tourist saw anything. The issue under discussion is not the validity of phenomenological observations, but how those observations are interpreted and what conclusions are taken to follow from them. The appropriate role for phenomenological evidence in consciousness research is not as

proof of ontological conclusions, nor as a mere pharmacological artifact to be explained away. It is an imperfect but indispensable source of observation.

The goal is not the suppression of ontological speculation in psychedelic science. Speculation is generative, hypotheses must be bold to be interesting, and the history of science is littered with cases where apparently extravagant claims turned out to be correct. A more productive approach is to maintain epistemic discipline without sacrificing the richness of the phenomenon under investigation.

Psychedelic experiences are genuine experiences. Their phenomenology deserves careful description, rigorous measurement, and serious theoretical consideration. However, there is an important asymmetry between phenomenological, psychological, and ontological claims. Ontological claims require a higher standard of justification than phenomenological or psychological ones. This reflects a principle of epistemic proportionality.

The tourist analogy presented here is useful precisely because it is productively ambivalent. It captures a position that is simultaneously skeptical and respectful, acknowledging both the limitations and the evidential value of experience. The tourists' account is neither the territory itself nor disconnected from it—it is a partial, situated observation of something genuinely encountered.

The participants (i.e., the “tourists”) in these studies deserve recognition not merely as subjects, but as indispensable contributors to the scientific study of consciousness. Through their willingness to describe experiences that are often difficult to articulate and deeply personal, they provide the observations upon which this entire field depends. In that limited sense, they may be viewed as tourists, or perhaps more accurately, explorers, of unusual experiential landscapes. Their reports are invaluable evidence of what was experienced. The challenge is determining what those experiences ultimately signify.

7. Conclusions

The concept of ontological tourism identifies an interpretive error in the study of subjective experience: treating phenomenological reports as sufficient evidence for ontological conclusions without the inferential work such claims require. Yet the solution is not dismissal but in the adoption of better standards of inference. Psychedelic phenomenology is a genuine, indispensable source of observation; the “tourist” has been somewhere worth investigating, even if the cartography is imperfect and incomplete. What the field requires is epistemic proportionality, characterized by careful description of these experiences, respect for their capacity to transform worldviews and motivate ontological reflection, and restraint in treating conviction, however profound, as a substitute for justification. Maintaining this discipline will not diminish the significance of psychedelic experience; it will secure the conditions under which its contribution to consciousness science, clinical practice, and philosophical inquiry can be fully realized.

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