

THE ANTIPODES OF THE MIND

*Charting the Phenomenology of
the Ayahuasca Experience*

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Meaning and Semantics

Besides these two kinds of knowledge there is a third, as I shall show in what follows, which we shall call intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*). Now this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.

Eternity is the essence of God in so far as this involves necessary existence. Therefore to conceive things under the species of eternity is to conceive them in so far as they are conceived through the essence of God as real entities, or in so far as they involve existence through the essence of God.

Spinoza

Vision or imagination is a representation of what eternally exists, really and unchangeably. . . . Imagination is surrounded by the daughters of inspiration, who in the aggregate are call'd Jerusalem.

William Blake

As summarized at the end of the previous chapter, in our discussion of temporality, meaning featured centrally. Meaning is also associated with other facets of the Ayahuasca experience that we have discussed. At the very outset of the phenomenological survey presented in this book, the overall enhanced meaningfulness induced by Ayahuasca was highlighted. As noted in Ch. 4, the general ambience that Ayahuasca generates is that things are richly invested with meaning. Furthermore, the inebriation makes people feel that things, even the most banal, do not just happen to be: they are there because they are the manifestations of ultimate truths and essences. Similar observations are also common with LSD and mescaline (see Ludwig, 1966; Huxley, 1971; Watts, 1962; and Michaux, 1972). Here, for instance, are comments made by Aldous Huxley (1969: 137) in conjunction with his mescaline experience; in these lines he describes what he experienced when listening to music by Bach:

The tempo of the pieces did not change, nevertheless they went on for centuries, and they were a manifestation, on the plane of art, of perpetual creation, a demonstration of the necessity of death and the self-evidence of immortality, an expression of the essential all-rightness of the universe—for the music was far beyond tragedy, but included death and suffering with everything else in the divine impartiality which is the One, which is Love, which is Being.

In this chapter I examine in further detail some of the manifestations of what may be characterized as the realm of meaning associated with Ayahuasca. Pivotal to this discussion is the intimate association of meaning with atemporality indicated at the end of the previous chapter.

Several different topics pertaining to meaning will be considered. The first is the global experience of enhanced meaningfulness and several psychosemantic patterns that are ramifications of it. Second are phenomena that people usually associate with an independent realm of ultimate meaning. In particular, these pertain to the essence of things and to Platonic Ideas and entities. Third is the experience of noesis—that is, the feeling that one is gaining access to true knowledge. Lastly, theoretical ramifications—both psychological and philosophical—of these topics will be discussed. This sequence, note, marks a progression from what is within the province of individual psychology to patterns that seem to pertain to domains that transcend this province. With it, our discussion also develops into being progressively more theoretical.

Non-Standard Semantic Patterns

With Ayahuasca, the experience of enhanced meaningfulness is pervasive. This results in several non-standard semantic patterns. By and large, these exhibit insight and creativity and they impart to one a new and enriching view of things. However, as will be indicated towards the end of this section, at times people may go overboard, so to speak, and the same basic state of affairs may result in what I regard as infelicitous conferral of meaning.

Metaphoricity

Many phenomena pertaining to the Ayahuasca experience may be regarded as the products of affording the world an intense metaphoricity. A context in which this is readily observed is the linguistic one. Under the intoxication, verbal utterances and linguistic texts often gain what are felt to be deeper meanings. Interestingly, the affinity between the Ayahuasca experience and metaphoricity has been noted in the indigenous context. Sherzer (1986) marks the prevalent metaphoricity of Ayahuasca songs and notes that the Indians attribute this to the fact that metaphors allow direct communication with the spirits. In the Church of Santo Daime people often speak of the ‘second reading’—an esoteric understanding of the hidden meanings of seemingly simple texts, such as those of the hymns sung during the rituals. Essentially, this consists in tuning into language with a pervasive metaphorical, and poetic, perspective. In Ch. 20, I shall further discuss the metaphoricity induced by Ayahuasca and shall relate it to more general theoretical cognitive considerations.

The Narrative Dimension

In the previous chapter, I have cited the contrast between physical and biological time made by Watts (1962) in conjunction with his description of non-ordinary

temporality. Here, I would like to suggest another, more cognitive, distinction between two types of time—*sequential* and *narrative*. Sequential time is defined in terms of physical units and consists of the ongoing progression of moments one after the other. Narrative time is defined not by means of any objective measure but in terms of content. It consists in the temporality of meaningful events.

By way of clarification, let me turn once again to the domain of cinema. The scenes in a film each take some time. Yet the time the scene actually lasts (that is, the time that an external viewer will measure, by means of a clock, from the beginning of the scene to its end) and the time associated with the narrative that the scene depicts are not the same. The former is usually significantly shorter than the latter. An entire film may, for instance, depict the seventy or eighty years spanning a lifetime, yet in reality it would last only ninety minutes. What I would like to argue is that under the intoxication, the Ayahuasca drinker—like the person watching a film or a theatre play—is situated in a world of fiction. In this world, the story reigns. As long as the story is being narrated, the normal flow of time and its measurement do not apply. As in a film, there is no direct, linear relationship between the actual duration of events in the world and how long they are seen for. Furthermore, the depiction is not uniform in the sense that the ratio between the time events depicted in the film or the vision and the corresponding duration in the actual course of events may vary. Thus, the determinant factor will not be the sequence of time as such, but rather the semantics of the narration.

In passing, let me refer again to the comment made by Swedenborg (1854) regarding the angelic realm that I have cited in the previous chapter. In this realm, Swedenborg says, 'Progressions are not in time and space, but changes of states.' This seems to me similar to the present contrast between sequential and narrative time. The words and the theoretical contexts are different, but the basic observation is the same.

The Salience of the Verbal Medium

The enhanced investment of meaningfulness is also associated with a pattern that on first sight may seem to exhibit the very opposite, namely, a disregard of meaning. Under the Ayahuasca intoxication, people often focus on the contingent medium of words and, disregarding their meaning, they parse the phonological form in a new fashion so as to come up with new, at times ingenious, readings of the linguistic expression at hand. As a consequence, the initial disregard of the standard meaning of words results in the investment of extra meaningfulness to them. An example already mentioned in Ch. 10 is an answer I once heard a master of the UdV give in response to a question regarding the meaning of the word 'Jerusalem'. The answer was 'Jesus alem', which in Portuguese means 'Jesus is above'. This answer, of course, has no factual or etymological validity whatsoever. However, it is significant in that it points to a dynamic cognitive pattern that is common both with Ayahuasca and various mystical traditions. In particular, it is pervasive in the Jewish Kabbalah. I myself once had a vision in which such a verbal

reparsing was central. I was escorted through an assembly of people and of physical objects. When I arrived to the end of the line, a wise old man told me, 'You see, this is the "Nature of things".' With this I had a novel insight: usually this expression is read as denoting the basic character of things and state of affairs in the world. Now, however, I understood that it carried a metaphysical-ontological statement, namely, that the ontology of nature is defined by things, in other words, the world is made of things. More on this will be said in Chs. 20 and 21.

Synchronicity and Syntony

Enhanced meaningfulness and non-standard semanticity may also apply to the temporal dimension. In particular, I would like to single out two phenomena which are especially common with Ayahuasca—*synchronicity* and *syntony*. Both consist in the interpretation of temporal relations as meaningful, and hence non-accidental.

Synchronicity (see Jung, 1951/1957 as well as Progoff, 1973; Peat, 1987) is manifested in the co-occurrence of two events that cannot be explained in the normal causal fashion; typically, this co-occurrence is highly improbable and it is associated with special meaningfulness. Indeed, coincidences feature very commonly in the stories of Ayahuasca drinkers (myself included). Whether these do or do not occur in reality is not important for us here. What is significant is the subjective cognitive feeling that synchronicity has taken place.

Syntony is manifested in the co-ordinated occurrence of two seemingly unrelated events. The paradigmatic cases of syntony involve rhythm. For example, more than once I saw large butterflies enter the open hall in which a *Daime* session was being held. It seemed to me that the flapping of the butterfly's wing was co-ordinated with the music played. At times, the feeling of syntony can be quite complex and it results in what may appear to be one harmonious and coherent composition. An example is an experience I once had when chanting in the context of a traditional healing session. The session was held in the forest, and whenever I reached the end of a stanza in my song, a (real) bird in the forest chirped (for another example of this, see the report by Kusel in Ch. 1).

Infelicitous Meaningfulness

In general, enhanced meaningfulness is associated with semantic richness, poetic flavour, and insight. Yet, this is not always beneficial. At times, the enhanced meaningfulness experienced with Ayahuasca may lead to conclusions that are manifestly exaggerated and faulty. In one of my first Ayahuasca sessions, I found myself sensing that all that had happened to me during the day before the session had been orchestrated. The people I met, those I joined, and those I avoided were all part of a scheme. There was sense, I felt, and order to it all, nothing was by chance. In a vision that followed I saw what seemed to me to be that which would have happened had I acted differently. The things I saw were not happy ones and I felt very fortunate to not have pursued a bad path. Once I observed a European man, a member of a 'shamanistic excursion' group travelling to the Amazon, just at

the termination of his second Ayahuasca session. The man was overtly agitated. He told me that he suddenly realized that all that had happened to him, and to his companions in the group, was all a *scene montée* (in French, a mounted scene). Paranoid feelings, which are not uncommon with Ayahuasca, can also be related to the enhanced meaningfulness induced by the brew.

Another case of what I would regard as infelicitous enhanced meaningfulness is that related to the phenomenon referred to in other contexts as 'speaking in tongues', that is—uttering sentences in a language the individual does not actually know (in the psycholinguistic literature this phenomenon is called glossolalia). Several informants told me of experiences in which they heard persons in the Ayahuasca session begin to speak in languages that were not known to them. In one particular case, I listened to a recording that was said to be Hebrew, my native tongue. It surely was not. In one of my first, and very powerful, experiences with Ayahuasca, I myself addressed one of my fellow participants in Hebrew. Of course, this Brazilian could understand nothing of what I was saying, but I had the impression that he could. More on this will be said in the discussion of paranormal effects in the next chapter.

In the same vein, I would address various parapsychological phenomena which are so often reported in conjunction with Ayahuasca. Under the intoxication, people very often feel that they can read the thoughts of others. They also feel that what other people do and say is specifically related to them. At times, these feelings exhibit a most remarkable insightful intuition, yet in many others they are false. As noted by Taussig (1987; see the citation in Ch. 2), Ayahuasca can reveal truths, but it can also lie. I have been repeatedly told the same by many of my fellow seekers in the realms of Ayahuasca. How to discern between the two is one very important skill that one has to develop in the course of one's long-term travelling with the brew.

Platonic Phenomena

Enhanced meaningfulness and deeper senses are naturally linked to what may be regarded as the essence of things. As already indicated in earlier chapters, with Ayahuasca people often feel that they gain access to the domain of essences and ultimate meanings. As further noted earlier, these domains are akin to ones that, in the Western philosophical tradition, are associated with Platonism. With these, too, temporality either receives a different status or becomes altogether irrelevant.

Essences and Design

In my first powerful Ayahuasca session (once again, this was the *Daimé* preparation session described in the Prologue), a new (for me) insight forcefully crossed my mind, namely, that in explaining reality, two levels of explanation should be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the level of actual processes. These evolve in time and are normally accounted for by the sciences. This level and the accounts

associated with it do not, however, explain the essence of things. These are—thus my reflection ran—determined on another level that is not in time. During that early session I found myself entertaining new (for me) ideas on theories in biology, psychology, and history. Evolutionary theories may account for how biological variation and change come about, I reflected, but there are aspects of the phenomenon of life that these theories assume and cannot account for. In particular, this holds for the notion of fit and the meaning of biological forms. In other words, the theories specify mechanisms by which life evolves but they do not explain the design that living forms seem to exhibit. Likewise, psychodynamic explanations give accounts of the genesis of certain psychological traits and personal behaviours, but above and beyond the contingent dynamical processes, there is what may be regarded as ‘the story of a human being’. This is best characterized in semantic and narrative terms. As indicated at the end of the previous section, *mutatis mutandis*, these ideas may be applied to the story of peoples and cultures, that is, to history.

As described in the Prologue, later in the same session I suddenly had (what seemed to me) the insight that what I was perceiving was precisely that world of which the Jewish Kabbalah is speaking. Essentially, what the Kabbalah—notably, the analyses referring to the realm of the Spheres—is concerned with is the grand design of Being. The relationship between this Kabbalistic realm and that of the physical world may be succinctly illustrated by means of the following contrast made in *Sefer Yetzirah* (The *Book of Creation*; for an English translation, see Kaplan, 1997), one of the most ancient Kabbalist texts: it is not that there are ten spheres because man has ten fingers, but rather the converse, man has ten fingers because there are ten spheres. The reader will appreciate that the contrast made here is precisely that noted above in conjunction with my early Ayahuasca experience. This contrast may be further characterized as that between mechanism and design. Natural scientists are concerned with the mechanisms by which the world operates. But in addition, questions of design may be entertained. The mechanisms and their concrete manifestations may be many and varied, but taken in unison and regarded from a more abstract perspective, a unified order may be grasped. This specification is to be made in semantic terms (i.e. terms that pertain to meaning). In general, in the context of modern scientific thought, questions of design are regarded as teleological, hence outside the realm of science; there are, however, scientists and philosophers who think otherwise (Teilhard de Chardin is perhaps the most famous one; see, for example, Teilhard de Chardin, 1965).

Essentially, semantics transcends time. We can all appreciate this when reading literary texts of past generations, inspecting old photographs, or looking at works of art from ancient civilizations. The child or the young enamoured couples that appear in them are long, long dead, yet for the reader or the viewer they are forever children, adolescents, or young adults. Infancy, adolescence, and adulthood are not just moments in biographical chronology, they are also chapters in a story. It is the story of human life, that which we all enact in the course of our own individual lives. In the Jewish tradition, when a baby is born he or she is given the blessing to

enter the bondage of the law (i.e. enter into societal obligations, thus becoming an adult, at the age of 12 (for females) or 13 (for males)), of marriage (traditionally at the age of 18), and to be engaged in 'good deeds' (throughout his or her life). All this will take time to happen and the particulars of the events are not known, but *grosso modo*, the overall outline of the story is already laid down. That dimension of temporal progression which, none the less, is not contingently dependent on time pertains to the domain of meaning.

With Ayahuasca, similar appreciations may be gained on a much larger time-scale—that of human history. In grand Ayahuasca visions (especially those I have referred to as 'panoramic') drinkers are often privy to a special perspective by which they observe such historical events with the detachment of distance (which does not mean lack of empathy). They observe periods of peace and periods of war, times of success and times of failure, Kings reign, exercise great power, and eventually die, entire civilizations rise and fall. With this, drinkers feel that they savour a little bit of the taste of the eternal and appreciate the perennial meanings of life and existence. As the Biblical sage Ecclesiastes (1: 9) said, 'There is nothing new under the sun.'

In line with all this is an insight reported in Polari (1984: 61). This leader of the Church of Santo Daimé characterizes time as a major mystery revealed to him by the *Daimé*: 'I understood that this truth is absolutely immune to any historicity. . . . A Truth that is not relative nor relativized by anything, which entered and syntonized within a dimension of eternal permanency. . . . Above and beyond a finite consciousness depending on matter and ending with it.' Discussing dreams, McKenna (1991) makes a rather similar observation. He contrasts dreams with history, suggesting that dreams offer an escape from history. Dreams, he argues, are eschatological. They last for no time and are outside history.

Interestingly, the association between atemporality and meaning is also encountered in the indigenous Amerindian context. Overing (1985*a*, 1985*b*) reports that in the cosmology of the Piaroa, a tribe from the Orinoco basin of Venezuela, in the world of the gods relationships between beings are defined in a manner that defies ordinary logical and temporal relationships. Overing explains this by noting that in this world relationships pertain to the world of meaning. Analysing the cosmology and metaphysics of the Piaroa, Overing also notes that the world of the shaman, and that of the gods, is outside time. Instead of being defined by linear temporal contiguity, this world is defined by relationships of meaning.

Platonic Experiences

Naturally, all this brings Platonism to mind. Platonism is the metaphysical view according to which there is an independent realm of reality that is constituted by abstract ideas (hence, this view is characterized as idealistic realism). The Platonic Ideas are entities by virtue of which things in the world, as well as the words of language and the concepts associated with them, gain their meaning. All existing horses, for instance, are manifestations of the eternal, independently existing, Idea

of the Horse. The Ayahuasca experience exhibits various features that are Platonic. As described in earlier chapters, a salient experience is that of the perception of the generic—seeing the general in the particular. In Ch. 5, I have recounted having seen, with open eyes, one Amazonian farmer as *the* Farmer. On later occasions, in visions with closed eyes, I have seen what I interpreted to be the primordial Jaguar and the archetypical union of Man and Woman. As mentioned earlier, very similar experiences were reported to me by other people.

Also observed is the experience whereby one feels that one is encountering the abstract and seeing it as though it were concrete. This, I take it, is what one experiences when one sees the world of Ideas, that comprising the Platonic realm. I have had such an experience once, and have been told of similar experiences by three of my informants. One of them told me she saw what she characterized as 'the Platonic spheres'. These spheres, she recounted, embody all true knowledge—everything that is not affected by time and change. Intimately related to Platonic ideas is the world of mathematics. Once I had a vision of Plato's academy, in which I saw the great philosopher observing the perfect geometric bodies. Visions of these bodies were reported to me by two other informants. Still two others reported having encountered a deity who showed them all possible mathematical forms; one of these visions was recounted in Ch. 8.

As indicated in our discussion of the themes of Ayahuasca visions and the ideas and reflections associated with them, Platonic features are associated also with the overall world-view that seems to be associated with the Ayahuasca experience. As noted, this may be characterized as dynamic idealistic monism. Precisely this was noted by Huxley (1944, 1971). As indicated earlier, Huxley's observations were made on the basis of his experience with mescaline, yet given their wonderful insightfulness and eloquence let me quote from them once again; in the original text, the following sentences are embedded in the fragment quoted in Ch. 4:

The Being of Platonistic philosophy—except that Plato seems to have made the enormous, the grotesque mistake of separating Being from becoming, and identifying it with the mathematical abstraction of the Idea. He could never, poor fellow, have seen a bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged; could never have perceived that what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence. (1971: 17)

Huxley's criticism of Plato is, I think, astute. It is in line with the distinction made in the previous chapter between the two types of non-ordinary temporality. As pointed out, not all manifestations of non-ordinary temporality are associated with stillness. Thus, a paradoxical relationship holds between meaning and temporality. While it expresses itself in time, meaning in itself is above and beyond the temporal. Specifically, meaning, like the contents of a book, the gist of a musical piece, the essence of information, is there, in a non-temporal realm that is not

dependent on any of its real manifestations in time and matter. Such ideas have also been presented by several contemporary thinkers in contexts totally unrelated to mysticism; in particular, I shall mention Popper's (1972) World Three, the world of cultural creations, and the non-orthodox philosophical approach to grammar proposed by J. Katz (1972). And last but not least, similar ideas have been presented on the basis of very different lines of reasoning in the writings of Jung (see Jung, 1969). Indeed, the Jungian archetypes—e.g., the Great Mother, the Sage, the Eternal Youth—may be regarded as personality patterns and narrative moments that recur in the Story of Human Life. More on these issues will be said in the final chapter of this book.

In this conjunction, let me mention again the study of the Piaroa conducted by Overing (1985a), who reports that according to the Piaroa there is a realm that is before time in which the special powers of the gods are guarded in boxes of crystal.¹ *Inter alia*, these powers include rationality and the words of songs. The knowledge pertaining to this realm is directly associated with hallucinatory experiences induced by psychoactive substances (not Ayahuasca).

Music and Mathematics, Aesthetics and the Sacred

Still another domain that may be associated with the Platonic realm is that of music. As we have repeatedly noted, in all contexts of Ayahuasca use music plays a pivotal role. A full discussion of music and Ayahuasca is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Here I would highlight only the relationship between music and the atemporal realm of meaning that is the focus of the present analysis.

The relationship between music, mathematics, and the world of eternal forms was, indeed, made by the Greeks themselves. It is at the heart of Pythagorean thought, where mathematics is regarded as the music of the spheres (see Plato, 1935; as well as Meyer-Baer, 1970; Stolba, 1990). Furthermore, in Platonic metaphysics the beautiful is equated with the true and the good. Significantly, as noted in Ch. 10, in *Phaedrus* (1914) Plato makes a specific relationship between aesthetics and noesis. He observes that there is a special class of intelligible objects whose apprehension does not require a mediation of our reasoning powers. They have the unique power of spontaneously revealing to the psyche the existence of an ideal world beyond the world of sense. The class of objects in question is that which we credit with the property of 'Beauty'. I may add that the intrinsic relationship between the realms of truth, aesthetics, and ethics is also central in the doctrine of the Santo Daime Church: the four key constituents of this doctrine are truth, harmony, justice, and love (see Sena Araújo, 1999).

The enhanced aesthetical sensitivity may be regarded as one manifestation of the overall enhanced meaningfulness that Ayahuasca induces. The same may be said with regard to sanctity. Tying the foregoing observations with those made in the

¹ Crystal, recall, is one of the most common materials of which objects seen in Ayahuasca visions are made.

previous chapters, a general hypothesis may be suggested. The closer one draws to the realm of the eternal, the more immersed one is in a domain governed not by procedural mechanical dynamics but rather by semantic considerations. In this realm, one invests more meaning in things. With this, both one's aesthetic and religious sensitivities are enhanced.

Noesis

Noesis is the experience of knowledge. As will be further noted in Ch. 16, noetic feelings are characteristic of mystical experiences in general (references are indicated there). With Ayahuasca, noetic feelings are common. As already indicated in several earlier chapters, people very often feel that Ayahuasca puts them in touch with the ultimate reality of being, and thereby reveals to them the deeper meaning of things.

The belief that Ayahuasca is a vehicle—in fact, the *prime* one—for the attainment of knowledge is prevalent throughout the indigenous cultures of the Amazon. In these cultures, knowledge of ultimate realities as well as all major cultural achievements are attributed to this brew. As indicated in Ch. 7, Ayahuasca—along with other psychotropic agents—is considered to be ‘the only path to knowledge’ (Chaumeil, 1983). The world revealed through the consumption of these agents is taken to be real whereas the ordinary ‘real’ world is often regarded as illusory. Citations regarding these attributions were presented in Ch. 1; here is another one made by the Tatuyo Indians and cited by Baldran and Bareiro-Sanguier (1980: 98): ‘The yagé recounts the words of the ancestors. . . . Thus, the yagé is for teaching. . . . For learning to dance, for learning to sing, for learning to speak. One is being taught to know how to speak, the other how to dance, and still another how to whistle.’ For further discussion, see Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975); Langdon (1979a); Chaumeil (1983); Luna (1986b); Lagrou (1998).

It should be noted that similar ideas with regard to the noetic quality of Ayahuasca are encountered in the new syncretic groups employing the brew. In the context of both the Church of Santo Daime and the UdV it is maintained that what the brew reveals is the ultimate, true reality, to be contrasted with what we normally take to be real, which is actually an illusion.

Noetic experiences were reported to me by many informants, and I had them too. These were associated both with personal insights and with intellectual and spiritual ones. Examples were already given in the discussion of ideas, insights, and reflections in Ch. 10. Here I cite firsthand observations made by the anthropologist Deltgen (1978/9: 69) who, by his own avowal, was very sceptical about Ayahuasca and when he began his research not at all interested in experiencing it himself: ‘I was “seeing” with my brain directly, not with my eyes. Or more adequately: I was seeing with my mind. And what I saw was of pure spirit by nature. I said to myself “gee, this is pure spirituality”. And I understood those mystics who had written about “marriage of the soul with god”.’

Here, let me note that when powerful, the experience of noesis induced by Ayahuasca is quite extreme. Many drinkers told me that under the intoxication, they felt they could know everything, reach everything. For some this is intertwined with the feeling, very common with Ayahuasca, that reality is one and everything is interconnected. As a consequence, every bit of reality reflects all reality.² Indeed, all that can be known is presented to one in one shot. It is merely up to one to get it. It is as if one is presented with the most sumptuous meal imaginable. How much one could eat ('grasp' is a better term here) will depend not on the offering, but on one's capacity. Likewise with the knowledge Ayahuasca presents. The reader will note that this characterization echoes one made in the previous chapter in conjunction with time; there I underlined the unbounded experience drinkers feel they may have when time comes to a halt. There and here the same state of affairs obtains: all can be known, all can be experienced—only the knower, being human, is limited.

Let me conclude this discussion with a description taken from a context quite different from that of Ayahuasca (or psychoactive agents, for that matter). These lines from Hesse's *Magister Ludi* (Hesse, 1969: 423) describe the experience I have been talking about here both accurately and beautifully, and despite their different context I find them most pertinent to our discussion:

For a moment it seemed to him that the mind could grasp everything—the sure, soft course of the planets above, the life of man and animals, their bonds and hostilities, meetings and struggles, everything great and small along with the death locked within each living being. He saw or felt all this as a whole in a first shudder of premonition, and himself fitted into it, included within it as a part of the orderliness, governed by laws accessible to the mind.

The reader is advised to return to Ch. 1 and compare this text to the indigenous characterizations of *yagé* cited there.

The Issue of Interpretation

Related to the experience of noesis is the issue of interpretation. How much of what is seen with Ayahuasca is the product of drinkers' interpretation? Experientially, the visions usually impress those who have them as revealing other, independently existing, realities. Usually, what is seen is so foreign and unexpected that drinkers feel that they themselves contribute nothing to the contents of the visions. I too have had these feelings. Yet, in the course of my interviewing I have encountered several cases in which the contribution of interpretation was explicitly admitted. Thus, consider a report furnished to me by one of the most experienced of my independent drinkers. The report was of the first powerful vision that this person had with Ayahuasca; the main figure in the vision was Jesus Christ. On a subsequent occasion when this informant again described this vision to me he said 'Well, what actually can be said about the vision is only that the figure of a loving

² This, of course, brings to mind monistic metaphysical views, notably those of Leibniz (1714/1945).

young man, clad in white and radiating light was seen. The identification of this man as Jesus was perhaps mine, reflecting my cultural background and religious beliefs.' Should we therefore say that what was seen was a radiant young man clad in white and that the identification of this man as Jesus was merely the biased product of the drinker's interpretation?

Phrasing this question in general theoretical terms, should we say that what is seen in Ayahuasca visions is to be divided into two: that which is 'really' seen, and that which is the product of interpretation? While there might be instances—like, perhaps, the example just cited—where interpretation may be relegated to a separate, secondary process, I am reluctant to regard this as the paradigmatic, general case. Because of my previous work in both psychology and semantics, I have difficulty accepting the two-stage analysis dividing perception and interpretation. My general theoretical stance in cognition is that there is no demarcation line between 'raw' perception, on the one hand, and semantic, meaningful interpretation, on the other hand. Following the philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962) and the psychologist Gibson (1979), I believe that it is impossible to draw a clear-cut line dividing between naked, interpretation-free sensory inputs and interpretative processes that are subsequently applied to them so as to render these inputs into meaningful percepts. In the spirit of Heidegger (1962), I maintain that cognition is always 'laden with meaning'. Applied to the example cited, this view implies that, from a cognitive-psychological point of view, if the figure seen was identified as being Jesus, then phenomenologically this is indeed who was seen.

Maintaining that interpretative processes are involved in perception implies that the experiencing agent contributes to what he or she sees. This is true of perceiving agents in general; this may be true of Ayahuasca drinkers as well. Yet, all this does not imply that what is seen in the visions is merely subjective. Or rather, Ayahuasca visioning need not be more subjective than ordinary perception is. Following the Kantian tradition, practically all modern students of mind adhere to the view that both our perception of the world and our conceptualizations of it are filtered by the apparatus of our cognitive system. We can never step outside this apparatus and know the world as it 'objectively' is. Kant distinguished between the cognitively determined *phenomena* and the unknowable things as they are in themselves, the *noumena*. I, along with other contemporary thinkers (as, for instance, those cited above) would say the distinction between the objective and the subjective is unwarranted. Our reality is the product of a dynamic interplay between what is given to us and what is contributed to by our cognitive system. The interplay is such that any simplistic division between the two determinants is futile. Likewise with Ayahuasca visions. Admittedly, interpretative processes are involved in these visions, yet this need not imply that what is seen is 'merely subjective'.

Thus, rather than direct the onus of our discussion to the question of how much of what is seen in Ayahuasca visions is due to drinkers' interpretation and how much to non-idiosyncratic determinants, I would focus on the distinct

characteristics of what is seen in the visions and on the dynamics of their generation. Like ordinary perception, Ayahuasca visioning involves processes of interpretation, but these processes cannot be teased apart from the processes of visioning in any neat, modular fashion. Interpretation is not added to perception but rather, is ingrained in it. And so is meaning. Like music, which is not the product of the concatenation of acoustic notes one to another but is there from the very beginning of the act of playing, simple though it may be, meaning is there in the very foundations of whatever we experience. In both ordinary perception and in visioning, the material of perception is imbued with interpretation, laden with meaning. What distinguishes the two mental states are the particular semantics that they manifest and the dynamics governing their generation and their development. On this I shall say more in Ch. 21.

The foregoing discussion notwithstanding, one should not dismiss the puzzling nature of Ayahuasca visions, their content, and the knowledge they are experienced to impart. A strictly psychological account cannot exhaust the questions at hand; a full treatment of these has to involve epistemological and metaphysical considerations. Some of these are addressed in the last two chapters of this book.

Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the observations made throughout this and the previous chapter suggest a twofold pattern. In the previous chapter we noted that atemporality leads to the realm of meaning. Here we observed that the complement is also true: ultimate meanings are atemporal by nature. In line with these observations, as well as with my firsthand experiences of non-ordinary temporality, I would like to venture a hypothesis: the more powerful the vision one is experiencing (or perhaps, the more strength one has) the higher one's capacity to maintain one's experience of timelessness. With this, one will experience more and more in what are in fact shorter and shorter periods of time. In the limit, the actual duration (that is, the time measured by a clock) would be minimal whereas the subjective experience would be felt as everlasting. Reflection will reveal that this makes perfect sense. The atemporal realm is outside time. In its pristine manifestation, it does not depend on time at all.

In the present discussion, which focuses on Ayahuasca, the relationship between knowledge and atemporality is associated with highly non-ordinary experiences. Reaching the end of this discussion, let me note that in fact this relationship is also encountered in the context of everyday life. As a rule, the more knowledgeable and masterful a person is, the less is he or she dependent on time. For example, if a lecturer is totally proficient in a subject matter and very much involved with it, he or she need not rehearse the lecture verbatim before delivering it. It is enough for the lecturer to decide what he or she is going to talk about, reflect or perhaps meditate upon it, stand on the podium, open his or her mouth, and talk. The lecture would take, say, an hour to deliver but epistemically the knowledge of the

lecture is with the lecturer all at once, in a manner that, in a fashion, defies time. What has been said about Mozart in the previous chapter is the most extreme case of this phenomenon known.

In closing, I cite two lines I have found in José Saramago's (1989/1996: 312–13) novel, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*: 'Into one year there enter no more things than into a minute, just because this is a minute and this is a year. What is important is not the vase but what each one of us can put into it.'³

³ This is my own translation from the original Portuguese. In Portuguese the word I have translated as 'vase' is *vaso*; in the English translation of the novel 'glass' is used, in the Hebrew translation 'container'.