

The Strassman-Monroe Enigma

By Douglas Lockhart

See: 'The Strassman-Shanon Enigma' (2)

(Part 1)

Pandora's Box

... my real problem was and still is the relation between Mysticism and Science, what is different between them and what is in common. Both mystics and science have the same aim, to become aware of the unity of knowledge . . . And who believes that our present form of science is the last word in this scale? Certainly not I.

Wolfgang Pauli

(As quoted by A. I. Miller in 137/*Jung, Pauli, and the Pursuit of a Scientific Obsession* p. 225)

The mind is not a citadel, but rather a Middle Eastern bazaar open to all and filled with more unwanted goods than necessities.

Beyond the Mind p.57.

W.E.R. Mons.

The Dark Zone Beyond Intellect

Reality may not be as straightforward as our straightforward thinking attempts to make out. It may in fact be so strange as to make straightforward thinking appear twisted in its attempts to keep what we know about reality on an even keel. Which is of course the point being laboured throughout the essays, articles and papers presented on my website: rational thought turned "rationalistic" is a travesty of rational thought. Newtonian mechanics suffices well for push and shove thinking, as does brute logic, but quantum mechanics defies the word "mechanics" altogether and demands a form of thinking capable of accommodating not just the unexpected, but also the downright bizarre. Our world, our selves, and our reality as they are presently known and understood may have to be dramatically re-evaluated in the light of information now surfacing about all three. And this is no new demand. The necessity to broaden

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our perception of self, other and world has been goading us for millennia; it is not something realised recently in relation to the bizarre findings of physicists.

The psychologist Carl Jung is often derided by the intelligentsia for having been an intellectual obscurantist, someone who conjured psychological fables into existence for the sheer sake of it. Fact is, however, he was, as may have been noted throughout this peripheral study of psyche, probably one of the most advanced thinkers psychology has ever produced. Yes, some of his theories are downright odd, indeed, some of them are probably quite mistaken. But that could be said about just about anyone who has ever attempted to think their way into and through some of the intractable problems to do with the human psyche. The human psyche is no mean territory; it continues to dumbfound some of the best brains on the planet. Jung captured this fact succinctly when he said, "Nobody knows what 'Psyche' is, and nobody can tell how far 'Psyche' extends in nature."¹

In *Beyond Mind*, Walter Mons uses the self-same quote from Jung, and adds:

This may seem a curious admission from a man who had studied the mind as extensively as Jung; but then the English language does not leave us open to any doubt about the meaning of this word. We can understand Jung himself only in the vernacular in which he thought; in translation we can understand his theories but not the man. The word 'Psyche' has no less than five equivalents in German. Each of these has its own idiomatic significance, which we can see best when these nouns have been turned into verbs: geist-lich, verstand-lich, sinn-lich [and] gemutlich. We would translate the first as 'spiritual', the second as 'intellectual', hesitate a long time before translating sinnlich as 'sensual' or 'sensory' - which it is not -, and find no equivalent at all for gemutlich. Yet to Jung 'psyche' meant all these things, and this contributed largely to the accusation often levelled at him: that he was a mystic.²

Was Jung a mystic? The question may in fact be meaningless. Mystics are associated with Christianity in its contemplative form, and Jung was not a contemplative in that sense. Neither was he a meditator in any strict sense either. In fact one would be hard pressed to equate Jung with either Christian or Eastern religious thought in a direct manner. Deeply aware of Christian doctrine and Eastern modes of religious thought he certainly was, but more in terms of what he believed to be a direct correspondence between those modes of thought and the symbolic experiences that arose spontaneously within his patients. Jung was a doctor and psychotherapist who, through interacting with those deeply involved with psyche's seeming ability to speak with another mind, became involved with his own psyche by way of mutual resonance. In this sense he became psychic by default, his explorations of psyche's inherent symbolic levels leading him ever downward into psyche's depths. The essence of psyche, he progressively realised, reached into the dark zone beyond intellect,³ a zone where words began to fail and symbols took over. Hence the sometimes rather obscure nature of Jung's prose; he had taken up the almost impossible task of attempting to translate back into words what these interrelated, multilevel, dimensionally ambiguous symbols so tantalisingly suggested.

The Greek word *archetypos* (archetype) has a level of meaning other than that in English usage, where it translates as "ancient type". For Jung, *archetypos* was a loaded term related to "orders of meaning" within psyche in the same sense as mathematics carries orders of meaning for the world. In Jung's psychological scheme, archetypes were an organising principle in psyche that arranged images and ideas beyond conscious awareness. They were, as previously stated, unconscious (I still prefer William James' term "transmarginal") and only detectable after the event. But they carried psychological force, and were detectable as inner urges that sometimes amounted to blows from within. In a manner difficult to explain, and equally difficult to accept, psyche talked to mind by means of symbols borne by dreams and by non-verbal realisations that flitted across the surface of the conscious mind like shadows. A discourse was going on within consciousness of which we were only vaguely aware, but beholden to for insights into self, other and world that sometimes surprised us with their pin-

point accuracy. Or accused us of our own stupidity. Or made us hesitate. Or forgave us when we least expected forgiveness. We were much, much more than we seemed, but also less that we sometimes supposed when our rationalistic ego got the upper hand.

Professor of psychiatry, Rick Strassman, admits to being forced to suspend his reductionist, materialistic explanations of psyche in favour of a more creative approach when confronted by the results of a research program into the psychoactive chemical, DMT. Wakening to the fact that he was undermining the reports of volunteers with his "I know what this is" attitude, he changed tack and pretended to accept what he was hearing from these intrepid travellers in inner space. He admits to not liking doing so, but interpreting, explaining and reducing the reports of volunteers to fit with psychological theory had caused a reluctance among volunteers to talk, and that had meant losing out on valuable information. Strassman's tendency had been to reach for standard explanations to explain the "enormity, consistency and undeniability" of what was being experienced.⁴ Faced with highly unusual and maddeningly consistent claims from a range of volunteers, Strassman did what any sensible psychiatrist would do, he tried to explain what was being experienced as symbolic of something else: wishes, fears, or unresolved conflicts. Some volunteers accepted this approach and went one further: "It was just the drug" they said. Most others rejected this notion along with Strassman's attempts to fit their experiences into a known psychological profile. How could a drug, they wanted to know, "generate a scenario that felt more real than waking consciousness?"⁵

Before enlarging on what all of this might mean in an experiential context, I should perhaps clarify the exact nature of what Strassman's was involved in between 1990 and 1995 when, suddenly, the whole project he had set up with official blessing was closed down by officialdom. Backed originally by the American Drug Administration after numerous difficulties, delays, endless applications and run-a-rounds, Strassman had engaged in the first new research on the effects of psychedelics in the United States in over twenty years,⁶ and that only because he was the kind of psychiatrist the administration knew they could

rely on. Associate Professor Strassman was a solid, reliable member of the scientific community harbouring no strange notions. Unlikely as it must have seemed at the time, Strassman's findings did eventually present a problem, for in spite of his best efforts to keep everything orderly, the project began to produce disorderly results: DMT was not only the most powerful hallucinogenic ever produced in a laboratory, it was also thought to be produced naturally by the human brain, and could initiate experiences almost beyond imagining.

Research into the effects of LSD had been abandoned in the seventies due to the excesses of professionals like Timothy Leary, PhD, and those he had influenced. The hope of using the drug to understand and control psychotic states had been usurped by what was interpreted as naive and unscrupulous behaviour, research positives obscured by the paranoia that resulted. According to media reports of the time, psychedelics produced psychosis in perfectly stable individuals; how else could one explain the bizarre experiences being reported? In psychological terms, LSD opened a window into psychosis affording possible future treatments, a perfectly legitimate approach to the drug's possibilities turned on its head by those who saw only a doorway to instant enlightenment. And so, in 1970, the United States Congress passed a law making LSD and other psychedelics illegal: the research door had been slammed shut.

The Intra-psychoic Threshold

John Allegro's fall from grace also started in 1970, his claim that Jesus Christ had not been an actual person, but rather a sacred mushroom with psychedelic properties shocking to just about everyone. It was a unique perspective, and it drew down not only the ire of his professional colleagues, but as expected, also that of the Church. This was however only the tip of a philological iceberg, for Allegro also claimed that biblical stories previously thought to have been at least partially historical, were actually myths pertaining to a mushroom cult of ancient vintage. This was enough to end Allegro's illustrious career, his identification of the psychoactive *Amanita muscaria* mushroom in an ancient Christian fresco too alarming a find for Christian specialists to deal with.

Apart from the obvious, my mention of Allegro at this point is made with something else in mind, namely, that Allegro did not see psychedelics as having initiated anything spiritually substantial to the religious debate. In Allegro's scheme, Christianity was no more than an institutionalised hallucination, a derangement of the mind that had gained ritualistic form and respectability as it conformed to the dictates of power. That was all there was to it. So also with the drug-based cults that had preceded Judaism and Christianity; they were all a form of psychosis based on visions and auditions with no basis in reality. As far as Allegro was concerned, the whole idea of "Divinity" had sprung out of experiences to do with mind-altering drugs, and "incense" and "wine" were the only surviving proof that this had been the case. In the early days of his research into DMT, Strassman's approach was probably not all that different from Allegro's, hence his attempt to impose symbolic interpretations on what he was hearing. Then came the shock of realising that his intellectual categories were insufficient to accommodate the extraordinary turns of mind DMT was initiating. Moments of panic ensued. Could these experiences be real? Could they be experiences of an actual world or worlds beyond mind as it was presently understood? Was there a psychedelic threshold in the brain that could be triggered into action by either DMT introduced externally, or by way of the brain producing DMT, say, in deep meditation? Such questions tantalised Strassman to such an extent he was forced to adjust his overall clinical approach in an attempt to determine what was actually taking place in his scientific trials. Not only did there appear to be a threshold between this reality and what appeared to be another, or "others", this threshold could be crossed and returned from without psychosis being the result.

The question of why a professional like Strassman came to doubt his years of psychiatric training and experience is a poignant one; if it tells us anything about him, it tells us that he was unwilling to ignore what was staring him in the face: psychological anomalies of such magnitude they left one feeling personally threatened. So what went wrong? Or is "wrong" the wrong word to use? Given that volunteer reports were exponentially beyond anything Strassman could have anticipated, it might be more useful to describe the results of those

trials as beyond known category explanation, and prepare ourselves for the uncomfortable fact that self, other, and world are, as is already known and understood by some, deeply interconnected at the quantum level. And “quantum” does seem to be the right word, for what Strassman’s trials revealed was not mental projections allied to psychological needs, but rather constellations of visual, auditory and existentially challenging “encounters” that called into question the whole 21st century conception of what reality is in itself. So unexpected, so outrageous and challenging were the experiences had on DMT that both Strassman and his volunteers had to make fundamental adjustments to how they perceived self, other and world. It was one thing to put DMT on trial, it was quite another to realise that one had perhaps been put on trial by, or through, DMT.

The Transpersonal Dimension

The psychedelic threshold of DMT seems to initiate a separation of consciousness from the body; psychedelic effects beyond explanation completely replace the mind’s normal content. This is followed by a sense of wonder and the feeling that the reality being experienced is quintessentially real.⁷ One anomaly detected by Strassman was that memory was sometimes psychedelically state-specific, that is, events experienced in an altered state of consciousness were sometimes only remembered when in the same altered state. This, he knew, also occurred in altered states such as hypnosis and dream.⁸ In a fundamental sense, psychedelics bound together our past, our present and our potential future, our preferences, our ideas, our habits and our feelings into a transpersonal whole. Included in this was the setting of the experience and who happened to be present. Then there was the drug itself, and that was where the problems arose. A multitude of names covered a multitude of sins in that the many names for an altered state of consciousness revealed “the deep-seated and ongoing debate about psychedelic drugs and their effects.”⁹ Strassman captures this state of affairs when he says:

Even if we agree to call it a drug, look at how many different names it has: hallucinogens (producing hallucinations), entheogens (generating the divine), mystcomimetic (mimicking mystical states), oneirogen (producing dreams), phanerothyme (producing visible feelings), phantasicant (stimulating fantasy), psychodysleptic (mind-disturbing), psychotomimetic and psychotogen (mimicking or producing psychosis, respectively), and psychotoxin and schizotoxin (a poison causing psychosis or schizophrenia, respectively).¹⁰

There is, in other words, no clear agreement on what a "psychedelic" is or does, and that in spite of the fact that expectations are known to "powerfully modify drug effects."¹¹ This means that what a drug is called influences not only what a drug is expected to do, it also influences how the effect of the drug is interpreted.¹² Research suggestibility is magnified and channelled by name choice, and by the fact that those engaged in such trials also carry a name: research subject or volunteer, client or celebrant. Then there are those who administer the drug: guides, sitters or investigators. Psychedelics are known to cause dramatic swings in mood, so what a situation is called can deeply effect outcomes. And how the drug itself is addressed: hallucinogen or mind-manifesting.¹³ One term suggests the subject will be out of control, the other that he/she will discover something not known about themselves.

According to the Strassman trials, "discovery" is the norm when in an altered state of mind. Which again raises the question of a transpersonal dimension to DMT experience, an ethical dimension related to what is experienced in some alternative dimension of mind. But how can a drug initiate an ethical dimension other than the one rationally known? And what did I mean earlier by put on trial by, or through, DMT? Can a drug initiate coherent challenges to the conscious mind causing investigator and investigated to

fundamentally change their perception of self, other and world? It seems so. But only in the sense of that compound opening up a doorway within consciousness across which a sense of self separate from the body can travel. That is in itself a mind-boggling proposition, but according to Strassman's carefully conducted trials, it was an experience verbally correlated across so many volunteers that he was eventually forced to recognise it as meaningful. But against his will, of course; there's nothing worse than research subjects upsetting expected research outcomes. After a while, however, even Strassman had to lay aside his preconceived psychiatric notions and accept that something quite bizarre was going on: his volunteers seemed to be travelling into parallel dimensions of space and time, and these dimensions seemed to be inhabited by intelligent beings.

As I read Strassman's book on the DMT molecule, I was reminded over and over again of Robert Monroe's out-of-body claims in *Far Journeys* and in *Ultimate Journey*, books which described experiences not dissimilar to those had by Strassman's volunteers, but without the assistance of DMT of course. The difference between the reports was that Monroe, over decades of experimentation with what he believed to be out-of-body experience, had built a coherent overview or system that allowed him to speak authoritatively of OBE experience. And also, intriguingly, of meeting and interacting with what he believed to be nonphysical intelligences, some human, some nonhuman, or alien. As one would expect, Strassman found the whole notion of such encounters problematical, but as their incidence multiplied across the whole spectrum of his volunteers, and no sensible psychological mechanism or taxonomy could be formulated to account for them, he was forced to choose the path of seeming acceptance to ensure continued volunteer confidence in the project.¹⁴ There were also multiple reports of kaleidoscopic geometric patterns of a Mayan, Islamic or Aztec quality being perceived, and of powerful energies that pulsed through the body at high frequency. Plus a dissociation of body and mind and a sense of rapid movement away from the body. Typical phrases were: "I no longer had a body," "My body dissolved - I was pure awareness."¹⁵

Rick Strassman's reaction to all of this was one of classic medical

incomprehension; he talks of reviewing his notes and being taken aback by the numbers of volunteers who reported making contact with entities. Confused and concerned by where his research was taking him, he began to wonder if he was in over his head. The experiences being reported were so odd, so confronting, so suggestive of claims being made elsewhere that Strassman began to doubt his ability to handle outcomes. His models of mind, brain and reality were under attack, his expertise as a psychiatrist called in question as he attempted to decipher what his volunteers were undergoing.¹⁶ Just as surprising was what these supposed "entities" were doing to his volunteers: they were, so it seemed, being manipulated, communicated with, shown, helped and questioned while in this altered state.¹⁷ But as Strassman was well aware, uncomfortably aware, this was nothing new. Back in the 1950s a study of volunteers under an early form of DMT influence had reported similar encounters, and schizophrenic patients had also reported encounters with nonhuman creatures. But perhaps the most worrying aspect had been reports of "intrusive procedures" being performed on volunteers during DMT intoxication, reports that further called in question the notion that everything being reported could be explained via the standard psychiatric model. Bizarre as it seemed, Strassman's volunteers were apparently being examined, assessed, and on some occasions even "probed" by what sounded like clinicians in an alternative DMT reality. One worrying report ran as follows:

There were four distinct beings looking down on me, like I was on an operating-room. I opened my eyes to see if it was you and Josette, but it wasn't. They had done something and were observing the results. They are vastly advanced scientifically and technologically. They were looking just over the traction bar in front of me. I guess they were saying, "Goodbye. Don't be a stranger."¹⁸

The volunteer who reported on this experience described it as an independent,

constant reality, not a metaphor.¹⁹

Mental probing was also frequent. One volunteer reported three “clinical researchers” probing his mind. To do so they used “long fiber-optic things that they were putting into my pupils.”²⁰ Another spoke of “solid blue-grey tubes, made of plastic? The machine felt as if it was rewiring me, reprogramming me.”²¹ While this was going on the volunteer noted what appeared to be a human being “at some kind of console, taking readings or manipulating things. He was busy, at work, on the job. I observed some of the results on that machine, maybe from my brain. It was a little frightening, almost unbearably intense. It all began with a whirring sound.”²² On another occasion the volunteer reported that he was not only tested and probed, but that he had had something implanted in his body.²³ Question is, which body? His intrapsychic body, or his actual body? The answer to this anomaly lies in Robert Monroe’s 1958 experiences of a domain inhabited by nonphysical beings. This is a unique OBE description in that Monroe’s excursions into another dimension of being took place when, like Strassman’s volunteers, he was fully conscious. Also, he seems to have retained the form of his physical body in these early out-of-body experiences, but later exchanged this for a less humanoid shape. He likens the process to gelatin taken out of a mold; it lasts for a while, melts around the edges, and finally turns into a blob. But it takes only a thought to reinstate the human shape and form.²⁴ There is also no limit on where you can go; the boundary of space and time evaporates. You are in another energy system and use the energy of that system to move around. But you are not entirely free; you are still connected to your physical body by an invisible cord. There is, in other words, a co-mingling of energy systems, but they are fundamentally out of phase and only come into phase under special circumstances.²⁵ When they do, however, strange things happen.

Simulations

One of the curiosities of Monroe's OBE experiences was what he terms the "learn forever method of simulation", a process built on the ability of his nonphysical instructors to create and place into a human consciousness an Earth-type situation so real and so overwhelming that Monroe could not differentiate between reality and illusion. This was done to clean up minor emotional patterns, he tells us, and was an ongoing process that could sometimes get very scary. In the same vein, there were also "classes" with instructors and other students that one could attend. Classes? Instructors? The cleaning up of minor emotional patterns? Attend? The mind reels at such notions, for if actual then we are part of a universe much more astonishing, much more challenging than we have ever imagined. Or are we dealing with illusion from square one?

Monroe's "learn forever method of simulation" may hold a clue as to what is actually going on during OBEs: perhaps everything Monroe and Strassman's volunteers experienced were the result of core simulations set in motion through DMT's freeing up of inhibitions. We seem to have a natural inclination towards emotional integration, or "individuation" to use Carl Jung's terminology, and that could be proffered as a provisional underlying cause for such experiences. Also, it would niche quite nicely into our so modern frame of mind where machines and optic fibres and such like are commonplace. As suspected in the 60s and 70s, psychedelics may turn out to be a useful tool in the treatment of psychosis, the natural production of DMT in the brain during "high" dreams a means whereby the mentally stable individual can further their own emotional integration. Or is that perhaps overly rational as an explanation (note how the tone of writing changed), an attempt to remove one problem with an explanation that is highly problematical in its own right. At first glance it seems like quite a good idea; at second glance it is suspiciously pedestrian. For why would psyche place simulations of Earth-type experiences within a simulation where everything Earthly is abandoned, where the context simulation all but undermined one's faith in the reality one has known since birth? Why would some level of psyche choose to play that particular game?

The question uppermost in Strassman mind after hearing the reports of beings being encountered was of a similar vein "How were volunteers going to live their lives from that point on, after having experienced such an inexplicable but certain reality? What could they be told that would ease their confusion?"²⁶ Or Strassman's for that matter. Was he "in over his head" in attempting to deal with such reports? He clears up this matter in his Epilogue when he says that the research he engaged in was inspiring, although professionally and personally gruelling. Not so gruelling however for a fellow psychologist and experienced meditator who, on his first encounter with DMT had this to report:

Out of the raging colossal waterfall of flaming colour
expanding into my visual field, the roaring silence, and an
unspeakable joy, they stepped, or rather emerged,
Welcoming, curious, they almost sang, 'Now do you see' I
felt their question pour into and fill every possible corner of
my awareness: "Now do you see? Now do you see?" Trilling,
sing-song voices, exerting enormous pressure on my
mind.²⁷

Robert Monro's books make for crazy reading, but there is something about them that keeps you reading even when your mind rises up in revolt against what is being relayed. More than once I wondered if he were living inside a psychotic dream, a wish-fulfilment exercise run amuck. The gullible would digest his offerings without a blink, add them to their collection of improbable beliefs and sail on regardless. But what of Strassman, his many volunteers and his psychologist friend? Were they, too, in a very sophisticated way, equally gullible? Was I gullible to even consider the possibility of their having stumbled on something of relevance to 21st century minds? If encounters with "entities" had taken up but a few paragraphs in Strassman's DMT study, all would be manageable, but they don't; they take up approximately half of his 358 page

technically oriented book! What is one to make of that? What is one expected to do with statements like these:

DMT has shown me the reality that there is infinite variation on reality. There is the real possibility of adjacent dimensions. It may not be so simple as that there's alien planets with their own societies. This is too proximal. It's not like some kind of drug. It's more like an experience of a new technology than a drug.²⁸

First there was a mandala-like series of visuals, fleurs-de-lis visions. Then an insectlike thing got right into my face, hovering over me as the drug was going in. This thing sucked me out of my head into outer space. It was clearly outer space, a black sky with millions of stars.

I was in a very large waiting room, or something. It was very long. I felt observed by the insect-thing and others like it. Then they lost interest. I was taken into space and looked at.²⁹

There's this whole different world with architecture and landscape. I saw one or two beings there. The beings even have gender. The skin was not flesh-coloured. I communicated with them but there wasn't enough time. I was so strung out, excited, agitated when I arrived there. They wanted to try and reduce my anxiety so we could relate.³⁰

Professor Strassman stresses that there were remarkable consistencies among

volunteers' reports of contact with nonmaterial beings.³¹ There would be a build up of sound vibration within the volunteer's mind, then the scene would undergo an "explosive shift" to alien realms. Volunteers inevitable found themselves "on a bed or in a landing bay, research environment, or high technology room" where intelligent beings, ready for their arrival, went immediately to work.³² One particular being would direct the others, the attitude of those others to their charge ranging from love through caring to that of professional detachment. Not every experience was pleasant, however; some volunteers underwent dismemberment, a tearing apart experience described in shamanic literature as part of the gruelling process of becoming a shaman.³¹ Or, as in one report, a sinister, alien-type insectoid environment where the volunteer felt as if he had been possessed. But there was a connecting factor whatever the experience had: there was a sense that the entities encountered had a distinct agenda allied to needs of their own.³² Or was this just the "needs" of the individual concerned translated into an exotic fantasy?

For those familiar with abduction literature, this will come as no surprise. For those for whom the whole notion of alien abduction is in itself alien, unacceptable, and laughable, Strassman's evaluation of their striking resemblance to DMT encounters may offer a glimmer of sanity.³³ By this means abduction experience ceases to be "extraterrestrial" and becomes an intrapsychic experience, although what that in itself means has not yet been fully determined. A surface explanation would be that some individuals are experiencing their own personal, unfunded research program into the effects of naturally produced DMT, and as I hope the following essay on the parallel intra-psychic research of Israeli psychiatrist Benny Shanon will show, there is, to say the least, more in heaven and Earth Horatio than you could ever have imagined. (please go to *The Shanon-Strassman Enigma*)

References and Notes

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