

The Strassman-Shanon Enigma

(Part 2)

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See: 'The Strassman-Monroe Enigma' (1)

The Ultimate Frontier

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 (1979), I maintain that cognition is always 'laden with meaning'.

Benny Shanon

The Antipodes of the Mind, p. 253.

Categories of Interpretation

The question of how one interprets experiences such as those had by Rick Strassman's volunteers is a moot one; reality is not willingly pigeon-holed into such bizarre categories of possibility by the rational mind. To even consider such categories goes against one's rational instincts. Professor of cognitive psychology Benny Shanon is also exercised by the question of categorisation which, when boiled down, is dependent on the vicissitudes of interpretation. Attempting to chart his way through the phenomenology of experiences had as a result of drinking the psychoactive brew ayahuasca, he too opens Pandora's box, and in *The Antipodes of the Mind* we are faced with the unnerving possibility of there being alternative realities cheek to jowl with the one we know, or think we know, so well. Unlike Strassman, who had to keep his distance from DMT, Shanon has partaken of ayahuasca a number of times, and as a psychiatrist and experiencer is perhaps in a better position to evaluate its challenging effects. Well, that's the theory at least; Shanon's experiences were themselves so bizarre, so mind-

blowingly challenging he began to wonder what the word "reality" actually meant. But there was also a curious symmetry at work, and that suggested coherence at a fundamental level of human psychology. We were capable of conjuring up similarly complex mental scenarios when the doors of perception were thrown open, the difference being that these scenarios were unlike anything experienced while in the normal conscious state.

The quote by Shanon prefacing this essay suggests that perception itself embodies meaning, that meaning is ingrained in perception,¹ that nothing divides perception from interpretation. This sounds similar to Don Cupitt's and Martin Heidegger's argument that language is all, that we perceive self, other and world through language as a secondary process, and can never claim meaningful access to primary processes. But that is not Shanon's argument; he rejects the idea of a two-stage process where only linguistic analysis can triumph. In his scheme, perception and conception occupy the same psychological space, there being no clear-cut division between interpretation-free inputs and interpretation-laden outputs. There are of course occasions when culture taints what has been perceived, but he does not see such moments as paradigmatic. In general terms, he sees no demarcation line between primary and secondary perceptions; they are, as Henri Bergson suggested, part and parcel of one another and cannot be pulled apart. More important, however, is Shanon's conception of "semantics", for with a twist to Cupitt's and Heidegger's notion of language as the only arbiter of meaning, he posits semantic output on two levels, not one. Subjective and objective mental states are, he suggests, distinguished by "the *particular* semantics that they manifest and the dynamics governing their generation and their development."² (my italics) There are, in other words, two levels of meaning, not one, and the primary meanings being expressed in secondary meaning terms may well carry, as in the case of ayahuasca experience, unique intimations of reality known to the experiencer on another semantic level. Enter Bergson with the additional observation that everything experienced is embedded in sequential time, a sequence of "frames" that reinforces linearity of thought. Remove "sense of time", however, and everything changes. Temporality holds us subservient to

the idea of rational sequences; atemporality, for Shanon, teases perception towards an imaginative reworking of reality.

Shanon then tells us that “ultimate meanings” are atemporal by nature,³ and as such indicate, hypothetically, that “the more powerful the vision one is experiencing (or perhaps, the more 'psychological strength' that one has) the higher one’s capacity to maintain one’s experience of timelessness.” By such a mechanism one is able to “experience more and more in what are in fact shorter and shorter periods of time.”⁴ Time measured by the clock would be minimal, the subjective experience of time appear to be everlasting.⁵ Which takes us back to William James and his experience of cognising everything *at once*, an experience he equated with *a falling of the barriers*. The barrier in question is of course “time”; we are quite literally imprisoned in the illusion of sequential moments. Remove, by one means or another, this imprisoning effect, and consciousness immediately responds with a more extensive penetration of what is perceived. And not just in the sense of, say, a heightened sense of colour, or a more intense sense of presence, but also in terms of meanings evolving almost effortlessly towards unexpected conclusions. Freed momentarily from temporal restriction, the mind immediately changes gear and exhibits a capacity for deep-strata creativity. The question is, how far can such a process be taken, and what might be the nature of the subliminal or transmarginal influences then made available?

In the concluding reflections to his cognitive study of the psychotropic drug ayahuasca, Shanon admits that if “commonalities in Ayahuasca experience cannot be accounted for in ordinary psychological terms, then perhaps we have no choice but to shift from the internal domain to the external one and consider the possibility that these commonalities reflect patterns exhibited on another, extra-human realm.”⁶ Extra-human? In the sense that the realm encountered functions as an alternative reality not dependent on the human, and is a source of knowledge and/or non-human entities.⁷ Explanations for this alternative realm evoke the notion of “supernatural” or “paranormal” realities, and are generally

conceived in terms of "the astral" - Robert Monroe's claimed travelling zone. Shanon notes that in this realm "all that will be known is co-present and potentially available for people in the visionary state", a state not dependent on time.⁸ As one would expect, the idea of supernatural or paranormal realms is foreign territory to Shanon, but not so the idea of a non-psychological explanation. For as he points out, did not Plato postulate the existence of Ideas as an independent order of reality, so making the cross-personal commonalities in the ayahuasca experience potentially explicable? In Plato's scheme, ideas, meanings and regularities of thought were housed as Ideal Forms in an alternative reality: hence the suggestion that mathematics was discovered rather than invented. Which allows Shanon to speculate that ayahuasca may open a perceptual door to a realm not dissimilar to that of Plato's realm of Ideal Forms.⁹

I have to admit to having a problem with Shanon's notion of an "external" domain. In fact I don't know what he means by that. If he means another realm of reality, which is what he seems to mean, then why describe it as external? This question can also be raised in relation to Robert Monroe's outer space excursions in which, he assures us, no form of extraterrestrial life could be detected. On what level of reality was Monroe travelling when he talks this way? It's obviously not the substantive physical level; it is another level of reality in which even his OBE facsimile body eventually melts away and becomes a blob of energy. Yet he talks of travelling in "outer space" just as Susan Blackmore speaks of having travelled to Paris and New York. But was it Paris and New York as they actually were in that moment of nontime; or, in Monroe's case, outer space as it actually is? Are the two realities in some sense close in spite of being cut off from one another? Once the barrier or threshold of mind is crossed, is the traveller merely in some other version of the same fundamental reality? Or, as Monroe's report eventually suggests, the second reality is itself a threshold to yet another level of reality. This claim, exotic as it may seem, is in fact very important, for it helps clarify reports from other OBE travellers.

Three Bodies, Three Levels of Reality

Basically, what Robert Monroe claims is that there are, beyond the physical level, two further levels to the OBE experience. The first is the nonphysical "duplicate" level where a cord connection to the physical body may, or may not, be detected. This immaterial, duplicate body's movements are limited to approximately fifteen or so feet from the physical, and constitute the OBE beginners first experience of being out of his/her physical body. This second level body also has to be emerged from however. When this is accomplished, the OBE traveller becomes an energy body with no fixed form - human form can however be re-established when and if required - and travelling ability is extensive. The first nonphysical body is left in "orbit" when the energy body goes on its travels, and is re-entered prior to re-inhabiting the physical body. A further complication is that "sleepers" leave their body without realising that it has happened, function intelligently while separated, but on returning to their physical body remember nothing, or very little, of what was experienced. Such travelling is remembered, according to Monroe, as dreams, high dreams or lucid dreams, and can involve flying. Landscapes are flown across in this state, cities visited (some real, some perhaps imaginary), the experiences had either banal, exciting, informative, transcendent, sinister, or downright frightening.

What this boils down to is three levels of reality with three quite distinct signatures. (1) The physical that we know so well; (2) Astral 1 as an intermediate, preparatory stage and, (3) Astral 2 where mind and imagination melt together into a heady mixture of possibilities with a strong educative slant. I say "educative" because one of Monroe's first experiences of conscious projection was, according to his extensive records, to find himself attending "classes" he generally attended while asleep. On turning up, his instructor sensed something different about him, and on being told telepathically that he had left his body while still conscious, said that he would have to move on. Why? asked Monroe. Because your type get impatient and bored, was the reply.¹⁰ Which, on the level of "special instruction" duplicate claims made by some of Strassman's DMT volunteers.¹¹ They, too, underwent what appear to have been Monroe-type

learning situations, trauma “simulations” where walled-off feelings of fear, helplessness and anxiety were explored, the beings they interacted with functioning as “teachers” or “instructors” whose business was to test, examine, probe and even modify the subject’s mind and body.¹² For Strassman, this supported a biological explanation in terms of certain hard-wired sites in the brain being activated. How else could so many different types of people report similar experiences?¹³

This leaves us with a physical level, an astral level where movement is limited, and a second astral level where movement is not only unlimited, but where travel across the breadth and width of ordinary physical reality can be experienced on a plane of existence adjacent to physical reality. Or, if you are adventurous, replaced altogether by yet another level of reality infested by entities, some human, some nonhuman, and some alien. Shanon’s use of the word “external” is therefore an attempt to describe this other, separate realm of existence, an experiential dimension of being so “other” as to seem external to the one we are used to, and one he himself claims to have travelled in. Yet intrapsychic at the same time. For if Shanon’s Platonic Ideal Forms equal an actual dimension of experience and being, then there is a sense in which all of these realities are profoundly interrelated in terms of the ubiquity of “myth” across cultures, a fact that would have elicited a grunt of approval from Carl Jung. But perhaps for all the wrong reasons, for in Shanon’s scheme of things this ubiquity amounts to a “non-psychological account of myth as a possibility”,¹⁴ whereas Jung’s reading of myth was strictly psychological. Shanon expresses doubt about the Jungian archetypes being an exact parallel to the data of ayahuasca experience, and that in spite of there seeming to be an obvious parallel. Why? Because the Jungian archetypes “fail to explain the commonalities of contents in both Ayahuasca visions and the visions and other materials Jung himself investigated.”¹⁵ So the question must be: what is “a non-psychological account of myth”? Shanon’s reply is arresting.

If myths were discovered by their originators through the use of substance-induced altered states of consciousness, then the world of myth is actually the world of Ayahuasca. I tend to believe that this is indeed the case.

And the mediating link in all of this according to Shanon are the mysteries of *Eleusis* in which Plato himself participated, mysteries in which the "Gods were seen",¹⁶ a realm in which knowledge of the realm itself was commonplace among initiates.

Ayahuasca, DMT and the Astral

The world of ayahuasca can be interpreted as reflecting either hidden parts of the mind (Jung), or mind-independent realms (Plato). Or, one can lump for a "creational" explanation; that is, ayahuasca visions and ideations in terms of enhanced cognitive ability.¹⁷ Shanon remarks that if the latter is chosen, then human creativity must be viewed as much more fantastic than previously thought because the experiences had under the drug's influence are so extraordinary as to call into question the mind's ability to create them.¹⁸ The same categories can of course be applied to DMT visions, and to Monroe's astral travels. In the end it is all a matter of interpretation, isn't it? Or is it? Shanon, Strassman and Monroe offer a range of data that lead one to conclude they were not dealing with hidden parts of the mind, or with enhanced cognitive abilities alone.

So with what were these highly qualified and experienced medicos dealing? Neither Strassman nor Shanon offer an easy answer to this question; certainty belongs to Monroe alone. But one thing is clear, the human brain responds to DMT and to ayahuasca in a predictable fashion, and it may well be that Monroe's experiences, some of which are encounters identical to those had by Strassman's volunteers, are also chemical-related. Fact is, DMT is everywhere. It's in the human brain, in flowers, in trees, and in animals, and along with ayahuasca is found abundantly in the plants of Latin America. In the form of a

brew, ayahuasca's effects are similar to that of DMT, but slower, and the indigenous tribes of Latin America have been aware of its psychedelic properties for centuries.¹⁹ Strassman's conclusion is that DMT is necessary for normal brain functioning: just the right amount keeps our brains tuned to what he terms "Channel Normal". Too little and our view of the world dims and flattens; too much, and unexpected programs appear on the mind's screen.²⁰ Then comes the eye-opener: DMT release at death may account for psychedelic-type NDE experiences.²¹ And as etymologically ayahuasca means "the vine of the spirits or, rather - the spirits of the dead",²² both DMT and ayahuasca can be linked with Monroe's astral descriptions of the after-death state.

The worlds of ayahuasca and DMT run parallel to Monroe's astral world; there are similarities, parallels and cross-correspondences. But also one major difference: Monroe's astral world seems more concerned with the dead. In his account of this other, independent realm, the plight of dead humans is primary, and encounters with non-human, or alien entities, secondary. But as with Strassman's volunteers and Shanon's interviewees, beings made purely of light also figure, and, interestingly, beings so far removed from the human as to have no interest in engaging with humans at all - except under special circumstances. Contact with such beings in all three renditions is generally unintended and uneventful, the impression left on the contactee that of disdain, or worse. But there is one consistent factor in all three versions of this independent reality, and it concerns the "awareness level" of those involved. At every turn we are confronted by experiences and interactions that by their very nature demand greater and greater levels of awareness, gradations of experience seemingly designed to enhance consciousness through insights to do with self, other and world. Or, as is more likely in this alternate state, realms of being so different from anything usually imagined by the human mind as to be utterly unique in character and effect. On being asked by Shanon why serpents and jaguars were often seen in ayahuasca visions, a shaman informed him that ayahuasca at first showed one the natural world, then later, other worlds.²³ There was, it seemed, a

gradual elevation of experience if one were capable of handling the challenges presented in the early stages. This principle is evident in all three account sets.

But what of the "entities" spoken of by Strassman's volunteers? As mentioned earlier, almost half of Strassman's book is taken up with volunteer accounts of such interactions, and large sections of Shanon's book deals with similar type encounters. But there is a bizarre aspect to all of this, for these entities are variously described as "clowns", "guides", "helpers", "spirits", "Gods", "aliens" "elves", "mantises", "spiders", "bees", "reptiles",²⁴ and on one occasions "something resembling a saguaro cactus",²⁵ As one volunteer put it: "It's as if my mind refuses to accept what's there in black and white",²⁶ an indication perhaps that projection is involved. Mythological beings such as "elves" and "fairies" appear in Shanon's text, also "guides", "guardians" and "teachers". And it gets even stranger. Some of Strassman's volunteers claimed to have visited space stations inhabited by androidlike creatures that were actually living creatures, not robots,²⁷ and one report had beautiful colours coalescing into beings.²⁸ But whatever the shape or contour, there was obvious intelligence, sometimes impish, sometimes impatient, caring or loving, but always meaningful in terms of the individual's personal life. Volunteers did however report experiences in which their welfare seemed secondary to the experiment being conducted on them by insect-like creatures. Monroe's "simulation" experiences on the astral plane are equally bizarre, but there is a wealth of practical information on how that alternate world functions, on telepathic communication (telepathy also figures strongly in Strassman's and Shanon's accounts) and the ins and outs of travelling on this other level of being. But whatever the scenario, awareness levels are generally the central motif, a factor of some importance as we try to piece together a rational explanation for what is being dealt with here.

When I say "rational", I of course mean non-rationalistic, and that opens the door to a more adventurous form of thinking. Relativity Theory has played havoc with our ordinary idea of time, and the same problem is reflected at the quantum end of the scale. The theoretical notion of positrons composed of anti-

matter causing time reversals at the cosmological level, or that of Tachyon particles moving at speeds greater than the speed of light carrying information from the past into the present, ought to slow down our tendency to reject what we cannot instantly digest. And as the philosopher C.D. Broad noted in relation to the known laws of nature, it may be that strange phenomena are "susceptible of an hypothetical explanation within the frame work of the Basic Limiting Principle. Physics may seem to have trashed some of the basic laws, but that is in fact not what has happened; all that's happened is that our comprehension of the same fundamental laws has been extended. It seems that Willis Harman of the Standford Research Institute was correct when he detected, years ago, signs of our having undertaken a systematic exploration of the vast, imperfectly known universe of our own being. The need to tease ourselves away from our mechanistic, push and shove view of reality towards David Bohm's "indivisible, fluid reality where mind and matter are inextricably linked" is, therefore, an urgent requirement.

Creativity as the Primary Driving Force

But does this mean accepting that there is a reality independent of the reality we are so familiar with? Under the heading Non-Naturalistic and Spiritualistic Accounts,²⁹ Shanon takes on the issue of indigenous peoples of the Amazon accepting ayahuasca's nonordinary reality as an independent reality, a reality that enables them to "displace themselves in an immaterial fashion and . . . travel across time and into realms that transcend the natural, thereby bringing them to the world of spirits."³⁰ In this vein they interpret what they experience as proof of reincarnation and paranormal travel, the ideas that arise within this state as objective truths from an external source.³¹ Monroe is in basic agreement with this approach; the "astral" is for him another dimension of time and space. Non-indigenous partakers of ayahuasca also tend to use the word "astral" to describe this non-ordinary reality, probably because of the West's magical tradition. Benny Shanon adopts the word "astral" for convenience sake, but quickly separates

himself from the idea of this non-ordinary realm having a quasi-physical character independent of the human mind.³² He does not believe in creatures residing in other realms, and he does not believe in reincarnation or paranormal travel. There again, when under the influence of Ayahuasca, he does experience this other realm as independent, a state of mind he describes as enchanted. However, being a Western university professor, a psychologist and a philosopher, he feels compelled to reject the idea of independence and respect the “frames of thought and canons of judgement that define [his] own cultural and professional heritage.”³³ The problem is one of spiritualistic and paranormal contamination, he tells us, a problem Strassman seems to circumvent through using the term “transdimensional”.³⁴ How this transdimensional realm actually works is unclear, but Strassman’s assumption is that the alternate realities experienced are possibly real, the descriptions given of what it’s like in these alternate realities indicative of an independent, populated realm.³⁵

But Shanon is no reductionist; he rejects biological reductionism in terms of ayahuasca experiences being explained away by biochemical and neurophysiological effects. The human mind is not to be understood through the theoretical frameworks of biology, chemistry, or physics.³⁶ The psychological should be explained by means of cognitive psychology, not explained away via pharmacological or neurophysiological theories. And the same applies to unconscious structures and processes that drug-induced altered states are thought to uncover, it being assumed by modern psychology that such states are achieved without the involvement of consciousness.³⁷ Shanon does not agree, and he goes further still by rejecting the representational-computational view of human cognitive behaviour in favour of “creative novelty” over that of information processing. Creativity is central to the mind’s functioning, he believes, and constitutes the primary driving force in the ayahuasca experience.³⁸ Brain and nervous system are necessary for thought, but they should not be used as

explanations for thought. The goal of science is the definition of lawful regularities, but lawful regularities are only lawful when a scientific discipline properly demarcates the level on which regularities pertinent to its perspective are found.³⁹

Rick Strassman's provisional explanation on what DMT does to consciousness is that it gives access to "channels" other than the one we are used to, and that these other channels are transmitting all the time.⁴⁰ That is a quite different perspective to Shanon's, whose creativity model is, I think, not entirely convincing even to himself. Yes, creativity of an extraordinary nature is involved, but by what means, and on what basis, does consciousness create the utterly astonishing visions described by Shanon in his reports? One's professional heritage is to be safeguarded at all times, but as Shanon admits, this is not always easy in relation to ayahuasca.⁴¹ What Shanon is after is "other conceptualisations of mind-independent realities that are less contaminated by spiritualistic and/or paranormal assumptions."⁴² (my italics) That's the crux of the matter for Shanon; he does not want to be associated with the spooky, spiritualistic end of Monroe-type explanations for the astral realm. He wants "realism", the problem being that realism, by its very nature, implicates him in the Catch-22 possibility of the ayahuasca realm being neither created nor invented by those who experience it.⁴³ This dilemma of Shanon's is detectable when he says: "If myths were discovered by their originators through the use of substance-induced altered states of consciousness, then the world of myth is actually the world of [the psychoactive substance] Ayahuasca."⁴⁴ In saying this he is not suggesting that ayahuasca experience is due to pharmacology, but that ayahuasca makes available what appears to be the hidden world that myth is based upon. Problem is, if this world is "non-psychological" as he himself speculates, then to all intent and purpose it is a coherent, consistent, inhabited realm beyond mental construction that only a change of mental channel can reveal.

Strassman's notion of "channels" that can be switched between sounds

original, but it was in fact mooted by William James in his book *Human Immortality* in 1898, and termed "transmission theory". Which was of course in direct contrast to the brain being conceived by materialistically-oriented scientists as a mechanism for the production of consciousness. In James' scheme, psychic phenomena existed ready-made in a world that only "an abnormal lowering of the brain-threshold"⁴⁵ could reveal. The brain was, in other words, an instrument that channelled consciousness, a "receiver" rather than a "producer". So the question is, can this view be reconciled with today's cognitive neuroscience? Surprisingly, the answer is apparently Yes. Gary Schwartz, a professor of psychology, medicine, neurology, psychiatry and surgery, picks up on James' "receiver" proposal and asks a question of his own, namely, is the production model of consciousness via the brain the only possible explanation for consciousness? His answer is No. The evidence used to prove the production model can also be used to prove that the brain is a receiver of information.⁴⁶ To illustrate his point, Schwartz draws our attention to the fact that televisions function

"as receivers for processing information carried by external electromagnetic fields oscillating in specific frequency bands. Televisions receivers do not create the visual information (i.e. they are not the source of the information) - they detect the information, amplify it, process it, and display it."⁴⁷

The proofs used by neuroscience to prove the production model are in fact identical to those used to prove the receiver model, and they are: correlation, stimulation and ablation.⁴⁸

Correlation: The monitoring of signals inside the television set or brain can be correlated with either images or, as in the

case with people, with occipital alpha wave decrease when visual objects are seen or imagined.

Stimulation: Various components of the television can be stimulated using electrodes, as can various areas of the human brain.

Ablation: Various components can be removed from a television, so causing the removal of images, and, similarly, areas of the brain can be damaged or removed so causing loss of images and/or some other malfunction.

It is clearly the case, says Schwartz, that televisions play an important role in the processing of visual information, but the evidence does not allow us to conclude that televisions create that information. What it does show is that much additional information is required if a proper judgement is to be reached on this question.⁴⁹

The door is open for Strassman's switching of channels, and for Shanon's hidden world of myth. In exactly the same vein is Shanon's observation that brain and nervous system are necessary for thought, but should not be used as explanations for thought. We might even ponder Professor Harry Hunt's suggestion in an article dealing with science and mysticism, that "multiple nested dimensions of recent string theory could have some distant echo . . . in the subjective, mutually exclusive archetypal or mythological dimensions described in both Buddhism and psychedelic research."⁵⁰ This is a direct reference to Shanon's ayahuasca adventures, and it links us back into Jung's theory of cross-cultural mythological correspondences, a theory which may have to be expanded somewhat to accommodate the possibility of that mythological world being an independent intrapsychic realm of huge creative potential.

But what does that mean? How can "mythology" constitute an independent, informative and educative intrapsychic realm? Well, there is in fact an answer to this question, and it entails the transformation of the ancient Greek

myths into a range of psychological complexes apropos to Western society. Why was this possible? It was possible because the "stories" surrounding these myths resonated neatly with elements of the human condition; it was as if the "beings" of these myths had been specifically created, or "intuited", to convey deep-strata information helpful to the conscious mind. This in itself does not fully explain the worlds of DMT or ayahuasca, but it does allow us to glimpse a crossover point between material and nonmaterial realities. The ancient Greeks did not view their stories as reflective of psychological states; they saw them as a "something" that worked on you from behind the scenes. The Gods and Goddesses were "real", and they belonged to another level of reality, an independent reality capable of colliding with ordinary reality under special circumstances.

Given what we have learned of the Greek mysteries in previous chapters, is it not likely that these mythic stories reflect the complexities of interaction, realisation and epiphany experienced by initiates while under the influence of mind-altering substances? Or through practices that released similar substances within their brains? Shanon reports that in an indigenous Amerindian cultural context, ayahuasca and mythology are intimately linked. In fact ayahuasca is regarded as "the vehicle by which myths . . . were created."⁵¹ As has been discovered by Strassman and by Shanon, everything depends on the strength of the substance taken, and on the core strength of the individual concerned. Not only do different levels of DMT or ayahuasca consumption afford different intensities of experience, the mental stability of partakers is also hugely important. Attitude and state of mind deeply influence outcomes; the experience can be profoundly difficult, yet pertinent depending on what one brings to the experience. It is as if one's ego, released from the tendency to obfuscate in relation to personal deficiencies, is allowed to creatively scrutinise itself. Not a pleasant experience at times, but one Shanon learned to live with. And those who partook of DMT under Strassman's strict supervision. Also Monroe and his students as they voluntarily underwent "simulations" set up by what appeared to be denizens of the astral world. One thing was obvious to everyone, however, there was a threshold that had to be crossed, a kind of barrier that had to be got through before anything of significance could form - the realm of the mystics, of

the yogins, was not so easily entered.

The Threshold Between Realities

Getting across the threshold between alternate realities is no easy task; at least it isn't for those who choose the contemplative or meditative path. The discipline of mind required in those areas is prodigious, the outcome not always certain. Some individuals spend a whole life time seeking that other shore and get nowhere; others slip across the boundary line between realms after only a few months of effort. For those involved in Christian contemplative practice, the way forward is a minefield of prohibitions; the ego's hope of transcending its limited sphere of action without actually relinquishing its grasping, acquisitive nature is an almost unsurmountable problem. Why? Because the tried and tested meditational "techniques" of the past (Neoplatonic, Plotinian and monastic) are viewed, like ayahuasca and DMT, as artificial, and therefore taboo by Christian purists. The push has to come from their conception of God, not some ego-driven technique or some mentally disorienting drug. For those actually accomplished in meditation or contemplation, however, the word "technique" is a misnomer; what they experience in the depths of consciousness is a self-directing process, a staged methodology that by itself overpowers ego interference. Self-knowledge is something one struggles out of oneself, and it is known in terms of behaviours. So what we're actually talking about are subtle systems of 'behaviour', not "techniques" in the cold, mechanical sense. Ego problems have more to do with boredom than with "desire" or "wanting"; it takes endless patience to dip below the noise of the thinking mind and be touched by inner silence.

One session of ayahuasca can sometimes equal years in psychoanalysis, a fact attested to by Shanon on a personal level, and one of great interest to psychology in general.⁵² The psychological barriers erected by our fragile egos to protect the "self" are often hindrances rather than helpmates, and these same barriers follow us all the way down into our own depths when we attempt a descent. That descent need not be meditative; it can range all the way from empathy shown to another in a difficult moment to allowing ourselves a little

leeway when most needed. By such means do we refocus the lens of perception and learn, eventually, that sitting in silence is not "time" wasted. When the threshold of being is crossed, time stops; our parcels of thought fray out into a sensitive knowing that releases the ego from its duty as sentinel. The "way" opens and the threshold as transition point between realities is crossed without fuss or bother.⁵³ But first you have to get to the threshold, and when there be able to recognise it for what it is.

The usual sign that the threshold between realities has been reached is that of geometric patterns on the horizon of mind. Shanon describes them as "geometric compositions [that] become symphonies of light and colour, like abstract works of art". But more than that, they are also like "infinitely extended arabesques, tapestries, or honeycomb structures." In full expression they can resemble, "endless repetitive basic elements or lattices of complex interlacing designs, unlike any seen in reality."⁵⁴ Such structures can be two-dimensional, three-dimensional, or experienced as having more than three dimensions. They can also initiate a new, more powerful phase in the experience, a fact confirmed by Shanon through those he interviewed.⁵⁵ Shanon likens these geometric patterns to a boundary that "delineates between two domains," or stages.⁵⁶ In the first stage the patterns can resemble "grids, zigzag lines, undulating alternating lines, multicoloured concentric circles, or endless clusters of brilliant dots."⁵⁷ In stage two this symmetry disappears and figurative pictorial images emerge followed by mythological images, soft yellow light, wandering clouds and music.⁵⁸ Sounds nice, but by what means, and toward what end, does psyche produce such effects?

A remarkable feature of ayahuasca experience detected by Shanon is that the experience is somewhat like entering a school with different classes. Even more remarkable is the fact that there is a sensed progression "within sessions and across sessions, over the course of one's accumulative experience".⁵⁹

Strassman's volunteers are also aware of being on a steep learning curve, and Monroe often speaks of "schools" and "classes" and such like. So is there a connection between what Shanon describes, and what Strassman and Monroe describe? The answer is both Yes and No. There is an element of similarity between Strassman's and Monroe's descriptions, but even then things are not quite the same. Monroe's astral realm mimics Strassman's DMT realm to an extent, and at times reflects Shanon's enchanted world of ayahuasca, but there is also a sense in which they are quite distinct. Monroe's "classes" are actual classes with what appears to be a human teacher; Strassman's volunteers are subjected by alien-type beings to various simulated experiences, some verging on the horrific, that instruct by default; Shanon, like those he interviewed, is pushed to his perceptual and conceptual limits, his fundamental impression being that the enchanted land of ayahuasca affords access to a subtle, sophisticated realm of learning and realisation not unlike the DMT realm. Which tells us that the major connecting point between all three types of experience is the transformation of consciousness through greater, and ever greater levels of self awareness and insight. So whatever it is that's going on in the human psyche, it is all of a piece, and if the many tales of intrapsychic interference surfacing world-wide have any psychological validity at all, then we may well be witnessing a process of collective inner change on an unprecedented scale.

References and Notes:

- 1) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002. p. 254.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Ibid, p. 392.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Ibid, p. 393.
- 10) Since the early 70s I've had a number of dreams that duplicate the idea of being "bored" while witnessing certain dream sequences. But not in the ordinary sense of being bored, but in the context of what I can only describe as "high" dreams. In one instance special instruction via a large screen was being offered to a crowd of seated people in the centre of an English country village. Having just arrived by way of a tunnel of spinning light, I stood to the rear of this gathering and watched for a moment or two, then, bored

by the banality of what I saw, I turned away.

- 11) Strassman, Professor R., DMT. *The Spirit Molecule*, Park Street Press, Vermont, 2001. p. 167.
- 12) Ibid, p. 199.
- 13) Ibid, p. 200.
- 14) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, (as above) p.395.
- 15) Ibid, p. 391.
- 16) Ibid, p. 396.
- 17) Ibid.
- 18) Ibid.
- 19) Strassman, Professor R., DMT. *The Spirit Molecule*, (as above) pp. 42-43.
- 20) Ibid, p. 327.
- 21) Ibid, P. 325.
- 22) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, (as above) p. 173.
- 23) Ibid, p. 137.
- 24) Strassman, Professor R., DMT. *The Spirit Molecule*, (as above) p. 147.
- 25) Ibid, p. 186.
- 26) Ibid.
- 27) Ibid, p. 189.
- 28) Ibid, p. 190.
- 29) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, (as above) p. 361.
- 30) Ibid.
- 31) Ibid, p. 362.
- 32) Ibid.
- 33) Ibid.
- 34) Strassman, Professor R., DMT. *The Spirit Molecule*, (as above) p. 341.
- 35) Ibid, p. 341.
- 36) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, (as above) p. 363.
- 37) Ibid, p. 364-365.
- 38) Ibid, p. 366.
- 39) Ibid, p. 364.
- 40) Strassman, Professor R., DMT. *The Spirit Molecule*, (as above) p. 315.
- 41) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, (as above) p. 362.
- 42) Ibid.
- 43) Ibid, p. 363.
- 44) Ibid, p. 395.
- 45) James, Willian, *Human Immortality*, Library of America. p. 26.
- 46) Schwartz, Gary, 'Scientific Evidence of Life After Death', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 17. No. 11-12, 2010. p. 147,
- 47) Ibid.
- 48) Ibid, pp. 147-148.
- 49) Ibid, p. 149.
- 50) Hunt, H., 'Relations Between Mysticism and Physical Science', *Journal of Conbsciousness Studies* (?). p. 7.
- 51) Shanon, Benny, *The Antipodes of the Mind*, (as above) p. 153.
- 52) Ibid, p. 162.
- 53) Ibid, p. 166.
- 54) Ibid, p. 277. See also Barack Morgan's review of David Lewis-Williams' book *Conceiving God: The Cognitive Origins and Evolution of Religion* (Thames & Hudson, London 2010) where Lewis-Williams refers to states of "intensified consciousness" as having three aspects: (1) along the intensified trajectory are Entropic Phenomena: geometric patterns such as dots, wavy lines and tassellations; (2) a tendency to interpret sensory experience in terms of existing knowledge and current emotional state; and (3) full-blown images of things that don't exist at all. In Lewis-Williams terminology, this

amounts to a "transcendent" experience in the sense of ordinary everyday psychological experience being transformed into content of compelling and extremely bizarre effect. Subjects are said to travel typically to "supernatural realms by supernatural means and return with detailed reports of complex interactions with the strange beings or spirits they encounter there", claims rejected by Lewis-Williams as hallucinations.

55) Ibid. My own experience of this threshold was in meditation, and it took the form of a geometric band just as Shanon describes. But it was a curious form of geometry; it carried an Arabic influence, and in places was hieroglyphic in character. Above (and beyond) this band lay what appeared to be clouds reflecting a great radiance on their underbellies, and for a brief moment the reason for this radiance slipped into view as the rim of a huge sun which could only be viewed indirectly. This sun was beyond any notion of "brightness", yet not blinding, and sensed as a centre of personal energy, yet in itself not personal. On another occasion, again as Shanon describes, I witnessed what appeared to be a pattern of dots in the form of a square where one dot, red in colour, moved within this pattern in a zig-zag fashion. As I watched these manoeuvres, I sensed that these movements were related to my own ego.

Carl Jung has been criticised by Richard Noll in his book *The Jung Cult* (Princeton University Press, 1994.) for his comparison of libido energies with an "inner" sun, or "fire"(conceived by Jung as the "god within"), a stance Noll dismisses as a manipulation of data later shown to have no grounding in reality, yet continually presented by Jung as if true, thus making of Jung a liar. Noll presents a credible argument for it being true, but the facts of my own experience (see above) suggest that Jung was on the right track, even if only theoretically. It can of course be argued, and will be argued, that I had read about an inner sun in Jung's works, and that my experience was no more than a projection. All I can say to that is this: Never in the whole of my life have I perceived anything so extraordinary as that sun, a sun as big as the actual sun, yet nothing to do with that sun. An energy centre of some kind which may or may not have been personal. No sense of "attachment" whatsoever: the experience remained utterly impersonal. Also, the image perceived did not any sense suggest "deity"; it was empty of any such connotation.

56) Ibid, p. 278.

57) Ibid, p. 288.

58) Ibid.

59) Ibid, p. 289.

