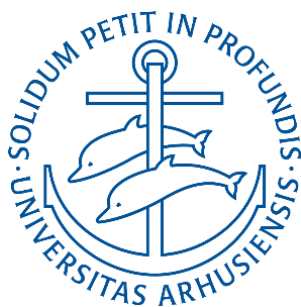


*Towards a Social Epistemology of Psychedelics: The Psychedelic
Knower as a Situated Knower*

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Abstract

We are living in “the psychedelic renaissance”. In these years, promising studies show that psychedelics and the experiences that come with taking these drugs have therapeutic and psychological benefits and can help with mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, not much research has been made concerning the sociocultural aspects of these experiences. In this thesis, I will critique the common framing of specifically psychedelic epistemology which carries on a traditional and individualistic view of how knowledge is gained during such experiences and thereby deeming it an idealized epistemology of psychedelics. With reference to and by expanding the concepts of *set and setting*, I will show and underline the importance of looking at social, cultural, political, and historical aspects when answering questions of what constitutes a psychedelic epistemology, calling for a social epistemology of psychedelics. In continuation hereof, I will lay out one possible social epistemology, namely the theory of situated knowledge, to encapsulate what epistemic features have an influence on psychedelic experiences and psychedelic epistemology, thus coming closer to what I refer to as a realistic epistemology of psychedelics. Lastly, and as a supplement to this examination, I will consider if it could be helpful to start with an ontology of *psychedelics as technologies*. This theoretical route of ontology will emphasize and work as another argument for the necessity of looking at psychedelic epistemology as an interplay of material, social, cultural, historical, and political aspects, thereby showing that we must work towards a social epistemology of psychedelics from an ontological standpoint as well.

“*To fathom hell, or soar angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelics.*”

Humphrey Osmond (1957),
letter to Aldous Huxley

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, a resurrection of psychedelic research has occurred - a phenomenon often referred to as 'the psychedelic renaissance' (Sessa 2018; Kelly et al. 2019). This research revolves around psychedelic drugs: traditionally referring to LSD, psilocybin, mescaline and DMT, but also sometimes MDMA, ketamine and other serotonergic drugs (Letheby 2021: 9). This explosion of studies that conclude that psychedelics can help cure mental disorders, e.g., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and addiction (ibid.; Reiff et al. 2020), has led to a surge of media interest in psychedelic experiences, for example in Danish newspaper articles (Pedersen et al. 2023). At the same time, some countries are now legalizing and decriminalizing recreational and medical use of psychedelics (Marks 2023). And though it is difficult to pinpoint an exact number of psychedelic users in Denmark, the Register of Individuals in Treatment for Substance Use Disorders saw a 7.3 percent increase of young people (ages 18-26 years) who have tried psychedelics between 2008 and 2018 (Petersen et al. 2022). The Danish Customs Agency also saw a tripling in cases of confiscation of psilocybin mushrooms in the first five months of 2022 compared to all of 2021 (Toldstyrelsen 2022). This indicates a growing interest in psychedelics in scientific research, media, politics and at least in certain groups of the population.

This renaissance of psychedelics has, of course, spread to philosophical research as well. As it turns out, psychedelic experiences and therapy raises many philosophical questions in ethics (Miceli McMillan 2022), metaphysics (Sjöstedt-Hughes 2023), and methodology (Gukasyan & Nayak 2022). In this thesis, however, I will be concerned with psychedelic epistemology and propose a social epistemology of psychedelics.¹ At present, this seems especially relevant given that research within psychedelic therapy as a potential treatment of various psychiatric disorders shows positive results. If we wish to construct a set of authoritative ethical and professional standards of psychedelic use

¹ Throughout this thesis, I will be using the terms *psychedelic epistemology* and *epistemology of psychedelics* interchangeably to encompass an epistemology that relates to knowledge processes before, during, and after psychedelic experiences. In this sense, 'psychedelic epistemology' should not be understood as an epistemology that is psychedelic.

in the future, research on how culture, politics, and sociality influence psychedelic experiences is needed (Dupuis & Veissière 2022). Examining what precisely psychedelic experiences and psychedelic epistemology consist of, what impact these experiences have on us, what sort of suggestibility is involved in psychedelic experiences, and what precautions are necessary to assure safe use, can help avoid abuse or traumatic experiences in these highly sensitive and persuasive states of consciousness (Muthukumaraswamy 2022). Furthermore, it has been proposed that this overwhelmingly positive research in psychedelic therapy and experiences is an overhyped “psychedelic therapy bubble” which will eventually burst (Noorani & Martell 2021). In the same way, psychedelic epistemology might have overestimated the epistemic potentials of these drugs because many of the epistemological claims are based on these (overhyped) studies.

In the light of the above mentioned, I will attempt to show that the common framing in epistemology of psychedelics is flawed due to the overall focus on the specific experiences of the individual and argue that important aspects of psychedelic epistemology can be captured only by adopting a more social approach. Such a social approach is necessary if we wish to understand all the (epistemic) processes that make up a psychedelic experience – especially in regard to the fact that psychedelics could be used as a potential treatment for people who are going through particularly vulnerable situations in their lives.

I will proceed as follows: firstly, I will lay out the main arguments of Chris Letheby's book, *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2021), which carries this traditional, individualistic epistemology of psychedelics. Secondly, I will account for the concept of ‘set and setting’ which should underline the importance of looking at social, cultural, political, and historical aspects when dealing with questions of epistemology in reference to psychedelic experiences. Thirdly, I will put forth my main concerns in connection to what I perceive as an idealized approach to psychedelic epistemology by applying the concepts of set and setting to show the shortcomings of an individualistic approach to psychedelic epistemology. Hopefully, this will lead us to see that an expansion of epistemology of psychedelics is necessary to capture which epistemic features are at play in these types of experiences. In continuation hereof, I will propose one possible social epistemology, namely the theory of situated knowledge, to encapsulate which epistemic

features have an influence on psychedelic experiences and epistemology thereby coming closer to what I would refer to as a realistic psychedelic epistemology. Lastly and as a supplement to this examination, I will consider if it could be helpful to construct an ontology of psychedelics as technologies as a mean to capture the way the material of our bodies and the drugs intertwine with discourse and sociality, ideology, culture etc. This will emphasize and work as yet another argument for the necessity of looking at psychedelic epistemology in an interplay with social, cultural, historical, and political aspects, thereby working towards a social epistemology of psychedelics.

2. *Chris Letheby's account of epistemic benefits of psychedelic experiences*

Before getting into the specific arguments of Chris Letheby's *Philosophy of Psychedelics*, I will very briefly cover what a psychedelic experience is and how psychedelic insights have been understood throughout the 20th century. Though the effects of psychedelics are still not agreed upon or fully understood, there are some common features of these experiences (here, we focus on experiences induced by taking drugs which are classified as psychedelic²). One feature is how these drugs react chemically in the brain typically binding to a specific serotonin receptor (Wikipedia contributors 2023). Another common feature is the phenomenology of psychedelic experiences, like perceptual alterations (intensification and alterations of touch, smell, taste), experiences of novel understanding and psychological insight, an increased sense of interconnectedness, changes in spatial and temporal experience, and changes to emotion, thinking, and sense of self (Letheby 2021: ch. 3). And thirdly, psychedelic experiences can, under the right circumstances, work therapeutically (ibid.: 16-23).

Regarding what types of insights can come with psychedelic experiences and how best to understand them, the history of psychedelic research contains many different conceptions of what these substances and experiences entail, e.g., essential nature of the drugs,

² Psychedelic experiences (depending on the definition) can also occur in contexts without psychedelic drugs, for example during holotropic breathwork, meditation, with VR technology or in sensory deprivation tanks (see for example Aidan Lyon (2023): *Psychedelic Experience: Revealing the Mind*). In this thesis, however, I will be concerned with experiences that come with taking psychedelic drugs.

most significant effects etc. (Letheby 2021: 35). Some researchers in the 50s and 60s theorized that psychedelic experiences were mimicking psychoses and thus could be used to understand what psychiatric patients were going through. Others followed a psychoanalytic approach and understood these experiences as revealing unconscious material like repressed dreams, desires, and fantasies. Others again understood the psychedelic experience as a way of “generating the divine within” putting spiritual and religious use of psychedelics in the foreground (ibid.: 9-11). These conceptions also carry into different understandings of psychedelic use today, ranging from use revolving around spiritual rituals to using psychedelics as creativity enhancers in microdoses (Holm 2023). The different and often conflicting theories are also one reason as to why Letheby wants to examine the epistemology of psychedelics; to naturalize the therapeutic benefits of psychedelics through the lens of analytical epistemology and recent scientific findings (Letheby 2021: 12). Let us now turn to Letheby’s arguments.

As we have already seen, these drugs have been and still are interrelated with spirituality and mysticism (ibid.: 9). Because of this, the main focus of Letheby’s book is to demystify psychedelic experiences and construct an argument for the therapeutic benefits of psychedelics based on metaphysical naturalism (ibid.: 3, 34-35). Letheby wants to show that “[...] a conception of psychedelics as agents of knowledge, insight, and spirituality is, despite first appearance, perfectly compatible with a naturalistic worldview and scientific outlook” (ibid.: 35). According to Letheby, the beneficial psychological effects of psychedelics are *not* based on comforting, yet probably false, metaphysical beliefs about the nature of reality, e.g., coming to believe that another part of reality exists which under normal circumstances is not available to us, although this has been a common theory of why these drugs work therapeutically (ibid.: 28). From a naturalistic viewpoint, Letheby claims that epistemic risks are not a prominent factor of psychedelic experiences, and that the psychological benefits of these experiences are not based solely on, for example, delusional beliefs about reality (ibid.: 5, 80). Though the epistemic risks of psychedelic experiences are real (ibid.: 198, 215), metaphysical hallucinations cannot be claimed to be the main causal effects of therapeutic benefits.

For Letheby, the psychological benefits of psychedelic therapy or experiences are instead based on a weighing of epistemic risks against epistemic benefits, concluding after

thorough examination that the benefits outweigh the risks (ibid: 164). This argumentation goes hand in hand with the model or theory of cognition called *Predictive Processing* on which Letheby builds his philosophical arguments throughout the book. This theory interprets how the human brain functions through a Bayesian model (Seth 2021: 97). It is not the purpose of this paper to explain predictive processing in too many details, but according to predictive processing, perception and self-perception is understood as an output or a function of the brain's best guesses at what you experience and perceive (ibid.: 83). Our brains are making Bayesian inferences based on prior probabilities. The brain, therefore, predicts what you are going to perceive and infers from prior inferences what it expects to see, hear, smell, and feel right now – functions of evolution to keep you alive.

In Letheby's analysis (as in much psychedelic research), high-level priors are weakened during psychedelic experiences causing for example hallucinations or, in some instances, a different representation of the self (Letheby 2021: 87). This new representation of the self, which is possible due to the predictions of the brain being loosened, is a common explanation to why psychedelics work therapeutically; a psychedelic experience allows a person to remodel an otherwise locked understanding of the self which is built from prior knowledge over a whole life (ibid.: 159, 206). It facilitates a 'breaking free' from a pattern of anxiety, PTSD, or depression, or just a negative narrative of who one is. These patterns of thought might have been with a person for years.

Though the model of Predictive Processing is quite complex, the argumentation in Letheby's book is rather straightforward: when a person is in a psychedelic state of consciousness some epistemic benefits which were unavailable in a sober condition become available because of the loosening of priors (ibid.: 160). At the same time, the person is also more prone to certain epistemic risks which were not present while sober (ibid.). For example, under the influence of LSD, it becomes much harder to correctly infer whether the alien you seem to perceive in front of you is actually there or not. However, it might be that a more accurate or comprehensive self-perception is facilitated (ibid.: 169). New epistemic benefits are acquired at the expense of certain epistemic risks.

Therefore, when following the model of Predictive Processing, it can be said that: “prior knowledge is always both constraining and enabling” (ibid.). This argument also works against the general objection that it is impossible to gain epistemic benefits from psychedelics because they impair the mechanisms that generate accurate representations of reality; psychedelics just benefit in other ways than by generating accurate perceptual representations (ibid.: 164). It is easy to see the epistemic risks that might occur during psychedelic experiences: false beliefs about the external world or the internal world of the self can occur due to the common *noetic aspect* of the phenomenology of psychedelics: the feeling of accessing something which is “more real than real” (ibid.: 25), or an increased attribution of truth and meaningfulness to the content of the experience (Timmermann et al 2022: 692).

In Timmermann et al.’s paper on psychedelic insights and revelations, an example of a psilocybin-session in a clinical trial reveals one of such epistemic risks that can occur during and after the experience (ibid.: 693-4). After an intense experience where a patient was battling with a monster, the patient had the revelation that the monster was in fact a representation of one of his late parents who he was now certain had smothered him with a pillow as a child (ibid.). No one could either affirm or deny if this traumatic event actually had happened, and six months after the experience the patient said the following: “[...] it’s all very well people saying “it’s totally symbolic”, I don’t think it is. When it happened it felt more real than the here and now” (ibid.: 694). It becomes clear that this noetic aspect that is attached to the phenomenology of psychedelic experiences in some cases may lead to false memories being “implanted” in the minds of the users. The epistemic risks of psychedelic use can be very real – and for some damaging.

But what epistemic benefits can be gained during a psychedelic experience that are also compatible with naturalism according to Letheby? One epistemic benefit of psychedelic experiences that is pointed out by Letheby is that of enhancing *context of discovery*, enabling a heightened ability to ‘think outside the box’ (Letheby 2021: 172). This epistemic concept stands in contrast to *context of justification*; the process of evaluating the accuracy and plausibility of an insight. Letheby concludes that a combination of the two concepts (a discovery through the psychedelic experience and a sober reflection and

justification of these discoveries) is necessary to gain new propositional knowledge from the experience (ibid.).

Another possible epistemic benefit of psychedelic experiences is *ability knowledge* or *knowledge how*. Here, Letheby argues in line with Benny Shanon that the ability or know-how to ingest psychedelics and navigate in psychedelic experiences is strengthened by using these drugs (ibid.: 172, Shanon 2010: 272-3). In this way, you are more likely to get what you need from the experience, the more you have done it. This is compared to meditation in which you learn to let go (Letheby 2021: 178). According to Letheby, this process of knowledge that includes a type of learning to let go and accepting one's inner experience can also be present during psychedelic intakes (ibid.). This correlation between mindfulness and psychedelic experiences has been explored by many researchers in recent years (see for example: Millièrè 2018; Azmoodeh 2022).

Two other epistemic benefits that may become available during psychedelic experiences are *knowledge by acquaintance* and *new knowledge of old facts*. These concepts relate to each other because both involve coming to know something which was somehow already known, but in a new, vivid way (Letheby 2021: 188). Knowledge by acquaintance is a knowledge process where something becomes known to you by getting acquainted directly with it (ibid.: 179), for example getting to know Paris first-hand by going there instead of reading about it on a blog. In the context of psychedelic experiences, an example of this could be getting acquainted with a new part of yourself in a direct and thereby new way. New knowledge of old facts is, on the other hand, an ability to represent old facts under a different mode of representation (ibid.: 185). For example, having an intense psychedelic experience in which you are presented in a different way with the obvious though existentially important fact that you are mortal, and that death is part of life. Here, mortality is (hopefully) an old fact, but due to it being presented through a different mode of consciousness, it becomes new knowledge.

The last sort of epistemic benefits pointed out by Letheby are indirect epistemic benefits. These benefits are not gained during the actual psychedelic experience, but in post-experience – the epistemic after-effects so to speak (ibid.: 191). To exemplify, Letheby points to depressed people who in their depressed states have “systematically

underestimated the probability of positive events occurring in their lives during the coming month” (ibid.: 193). Because of a more accurate estimation of forecasting positive events in their lives after a successful session of psychedelic therapy, it could be argued that these people have gained a sort of indirect knowledge about a cognitive bias of how events will turn out (ibid.). In this way, Letheby argues for both direct and indirect epistemic benefits of psychedelic experiences and therapy.

It is important to mention that Letheby does not stand alone with this sort of understanding of psychedelic experiences or therapy as a way to remodel a narrative around the self built on predictive processing. This ‘unconstraining’ of ingrown thought patterns is a common way for psychedelic researchers to understand the therapeutic and psychological benefits that can come with these experiences (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 572). Two of these are Nour and Carhart-Harris (2017) and Amada et al. (2020). This is also the framework that is present in Michael Pollan’s book *How to change your mind* (Pollan 2018) – a book that was made into a popular Netflix documentary series last year.

In continuation of this claim – that the self-remodeling view of psychological benefits is dominant in many psychedelic scientific arenas – it is worth mentioning another point. Namely, that this understanding looks at psychedelic therapy or experiences from an individualistic point of view. As the reader might already have noticed, the focus is primarily on the individual and, as in Letheby’s book, on interpretations or narratives of the self – how does this individual understand herself, and how can this narrative be shifted in a positive way using the psychedelic experience as a catalyst. In this way, the epistemological work and arguments that have been put forward by Letheby are in line with a traditional and standard view of epistemology where “the person or agent in question that seeks the truth is a single individual who undertakes the task all by himself/herself” (Goldman & O’Connor 2021: sec. 1). In this traditional view, the individual is isolated from her social setting and viewed as “the locus of epistemic properties such as belief, knowledge, cognition, rationality, epistemic virtue, and objectivity” (Tollefsen 2019: 263).

However, my hypothesis is that this is not the most accurate way to look at psychedelic experiences. As we shall see, these experiences carry with them a heightened

suggestibility of your mindset and the environment in which the drugs are being ingested. As anthropologist, David Dupuis, highlights in one of his articles, this alleged “freeing up” or “unconstraining” of cognition must also urge psychedelic scholars to examine “the interpersonal, ideological, and suggestion factors that facilitate the crystallization of new meanings, explanatory models, beliefs, worldviews, values, and behaviors prior to, during, and after psychedelic experiences” (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 575). Unconstrained priors do not just mean being able to ‘think outside the box’³, it must also imply an enhanced suggestibility to “[r]itual and technical practices, shared symbolic and mythological elaboration, charismatic healers, expectation, anticipation, repetition, trust, [...] a feeling of special attention, insight, catharsis, [and] reframing” (ibid.).

In Letheby’s book, this aspect of psychedelic experiences is almost entirely neglected. With only three pages in the beginning of the book concerning the rich history of psychedelics, and only a brief mention of set and setting in connection to safe use of these drugs, we can see that these concepts are of very little importance to Letheby’s epistemological work. ‘Set and setting’ are not even present in the otherwise comprehensive index in the back of the book. For Letheby (as for many other psychedelic researchers), set and setting are concepts made up only to ensure that ‘bad trips’ will not occur; if guidelines are followed – meaning ensuring the right mindset of the user and the drugs being ingested in a comfortable room with some music and a therapist – psychedelics are not harmful⁴ (Letheby 2021: 13). What is the point, however, is not that set and setting do not impact safe use of psychedelics, this is self-evident. The point is that this is not the *only* impact of set and setting. Set and setting carry with them epistemological

³ This is a popular misunderstanding given, among other things, the etymology of the word “psychedelic” which in Greek means something along the lines of “mind manifesting” revealing the strong belief of the inventors of the word, Aldous Huxley and Humphrey Osmond, that psychedelics can reveal unused potential of cognition (Wikipedia contributors 2023). Another interpretation of the word that fits better with a sociocultural theory of psychedelics could be to understand ‘mind manifesting’ as revealing the mind in continuation of the sociocultural and ideological influences involved in set and setting.

⁴ Of course, it makes sense that this emphasis is made, particularly because of the history of psychedelics where these drugs have been looked upon as extremely dangerous and with the potential to make users “loose their minds”. As Phoebe Friesen points out in her article about the entanglement of psychedelics and psychosis, psychedelic researchers and therapists are fighting a battle these years where they need to contrast themselves with the framework of psychedelics being psychotic-inducing, in order that research can continue to grow as this is also a very lucrative business (Friesen 2022).

weight. We shall go into an explanation of these two concepts now and their impact on psychedelic experiences. Afterwards, the concepts of set and setting will work as a way to highlight the missing aspects of Letheby's idealized epistemology of psychedelics.

3. '*Set and setting*' as concepts

It is well-known, both in the medical field and psychedelic communities, that the concepts of 'set and setting' play a big role in psychedelic experiences and influence the outcomes of these experiences (Bunce 1979; Hartogsohn 2016; Carhart-Harris et al. 2018; Dupuis 2022A, Hartogsohn 2022). Psychedelic experiences are well-known for remarkable diversity in phenomenology (Friesen 2022: 597) and being conditional on cultural context (Dupuis 2022A) but are also known to enhance suggestibility; an increased tendency to accept and act on ideas or attitudes of others (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 573). This knowledge that extrapharmacological factors in some capacity influence psychedelic experiences (and drug experiences overall) is not new. Psychedelics have been used in thousands of years in healing and religious rituals⁵ (Gobbi et al. 2022: 718).

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, many psychedelic researchers started studying how cultural and social elements shape these experiences, and principles of the suggestibility of psychedelics are still being discussed and used today, e.g., to facilitate 'psychedelic first aid' at psytrance festivals (Hartogsohn 2016: 1261). In the 1960s, Timothy Leary and his colleagues coined the concepts of *set and setting* for the first time. Here, *set* was defined as psychological factors of personality, preparation, expectation, and intention, whereas *setting* included environmental factors, such as physical, social, and cultural surroundings of the experience (Leary et al., 1963).

However, in clinical trials with psychedelics today, set and setting are commonly reduced to "[...] the prepared state of an individual mind [...]" and "[...] the immediate

⁵ In the context of psychedelic epistemology, it is important to note that contributions from Indigenous peoples must be acknowledged as not to override and colonize Indigenous knowledge systems, and to realize that Indigenous insights are just as valid in scientific inquiry and that our theoretical frameworks and methodologies in psychedelic science have a history of colonialism (Fotio 2020).

physical surroundings for the psychedelic experience” (Noorani 2021: 203-4). In a medical context, the two concepts are often boiled down to an understanding of psychedelic experiences based on the effects primarily come from the drugs themselves (ibid., Devenot et al. 2022: 361-2, Sadowska 2022: 35). In general, the therapeutic elements of psychedelic experiences are mostly approached from neuropharmacological and -biological perspectives (Dupuis 2022B). And though researchers are aware of the therapeutic modalities and frameworks that are present and influence set and setting, scientific literature around psychedelic medicine often reduces these points “to footnotes and passing mentions” (Devenot et al. 2022: 362). This is in part due to an ideology of “pharmacologicalism”, which both helped psychiatry to become part of scientific medicines, but also made sure that pharmaceutical companies must fulfill very specific regulatory requirements before their drug can be acknowledged as “a real drug”, i.e. adapt to the golden standard of placebo-control – a standard, which for obvious reasons, has proven difficult for psychedelic researchers to live up to (Langlitz 2011: 259; Sadowska 2022: 35).

In research fields such as anthropology, ethnography and sociology, set and setting were explored (mostly back in the 60s and 70s) as containing “culturally influenced visions” (Langdon 1979) or “stereotypic visions” (Dobkin de Rios 1974), putting much more emphasis on the social, political, and cultural aspects of these experiences. In recent years, set and setting are again looked at from a sociocultural point of view, though this sort of psychedelic research is still sparse overall (Dupuis 2022A; Dupuis & Veissière 2022; Neitzke-Spruill 2019). One of such researchers is anthropologist, David Dupuis, who examines psychedelic experiences through a lens of what he calls ‘socialization of hallucinations’ (Dupuis 2022A). In continuation of this research, Dupuis has elsewhere argued with Samuel Veissière that psychedelics work as ‘active super-placebos’ (Dupuis & Veissière 2022).

In contrast to the neuropharmacological and -biological perspective on psychedelic experiences (the perspective which much of Letheby’s arguments rely on), it is here argued that cultural background and social interactions organize the relationship to the hallucinogenic experience and its very phenomenology (ibid.). Rituals, education of attention, categorization of perceptions, and shaping of emotions and expectations around

the experience have a powerful impact on the framework from which the experience is interpreted and structured (ibid.; Dupuis & Veissière 2022). Through the lens of ‘socialization of hallucinations’ and ethnographic research, Dupuis illustrates that psychedelics are not just pharmaceutical drugs with biological effects, but “powerful catalysts of social affiliation, enculturation, and belief transmission” (Dupuis 2021A: 2), or what he and Veissière call active super-placebos; “a substance that actually enhances the suggestive effects of contextual cues” (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 574). However, psychedelic experiences do not only emerge from and are influenced by cultural and social aspects. Of course, psychedelics also have a chemical and biological function on the brain and the body. We will come back to this interconnection of biology and discourse in the last section of the thesis.

It is also worth mentioning that depending on the framework or context which psychedelic experiences and the drugs are set in, set and setting can mean different things to different users (Holm et al. 2023, Hartogsohn 2022); e.g., viewing psychedelic drugs as a tool to optimize oneself might lead to a different understanding of set and setting than looking at psychedelic experiences as a spiritual journey or as a way to really enjoy dancing all night at a rave. Different psychedelic discourses make specific “truth-claims” about effects of these drugs referencing for example physiology or psychology (Letcher 2007: 75). In the Global North, psychedelic drugs have undergone major shifts since LSD was first synthesized by Albert Hoffmann in 1938 (Dupuis & Veissière 2022; Friesen 2022); changes in discourses around psychedelics have made a complex historical and political web of how they can be understood. We could say that how set and setting is understood diachronically and synchronically is in some way also part of what constitutes set and setting.

For example, psychedelics are popularly understood as promoting “left-wing, anti-authoritarian, and pro-environmental attitudes” (Langlitz 2023: 3), but when diving deeper into psychedelic subcommunities it becomes clear that intellectuals of alt-right counter-culture also have a growing interest in psychedelics (Langlitz 2020). By knocking down the stereotypical view of psychedelics as left-wing leaning, it is apparent that psychedelics “can strengthen all sorts of political movements depending on the political

orientation of the individual and the environment” (Loneran 2021: subheading). In this way, a political set and setting also play a role in the psychedelic experience.

The influence of subcultures is also pointed out by Ido Hartogsohn. In a psychedelic context, he calls these subcultures *microclimates of set and setting* (Hartogsohn 2022). These microclimates can be seen as a level of set and setting mediating between the foundation of a collective level of set and setting (a broader background of sociocultural context) and the specific individual level of set and setting (personality, mood, expectations, intentions on given day and immediate physical and social environment) (ibid.: 586). The microclimates are, of course, historically as well as socioculturally rooted (ibid.: 587).

An example of the complex ways in which history and politics can impact psychedelic experiences is highlighted in an article by Earp and Yaden (2021). Here, they put forward an example from a clinical study of MDMA where a woman of color explains her unnerving experience of being in a clinical research room while taking an otherwise illegal drug: “I was so scared. [...] I thought to myself, “You mean to tell me, they want to bring me, a Black female, into a clinical setting to receive a psychedelic substance? It felt like a set-up. Were the police hiding somewhere?” (Earp & Yaden 2021: 219-20). This shows that a cultural, political, and historical background can work as a foundation of how the experience will unfold.

It, therefore, seems that set and setting are extremely important concepts to keep in mind when doing psychedelic research, and that epistemology of psychedelics must take these into account as well. But as already mentioned, the sociocultural research which can highlight the extrapharmacological factors of psychedelics is poorly represented in psychedelic research. As we shall see, this is also the case in the epistemology of psychedelics. However, by leaving out this crucial aspect of psychedelic experiences, we will not have all the answers to what actually constitutes an epistemology of psychedelics.

In the next section, we shall therefore apply these elements of set and setting to critique Letheby's arguments in his book in order to show that they lack social, cultural,

political, and historical features and thereby constitute an idealized rather than a complete epistemology of psychedelics.

4. Set and setting as a missing aspect of Letheby's argumentation

I have now sketched out what Letheby claims to be the epistemic benefits of psychedelic experiences and the framework in which many psychedelic scholars understand these experiences. Furthermore, I have underlined how Letheby argues from an individual epistemological viewpoint with focus almost exclusively on how a single individual goes through knowledge processes during and after a psychedelic experience (already, we can see that almost no emphasis is put on what happens *before* the experience). I shall now show in general terms that this common framework lacks a sociocultural aspect. Later, I will investigate through what other type of epistemological framework it might be more fruitful to analyze these experiences. I will go through each benefit that Letheby has accounted for and show in which way the sociocultural aspect of the experience is missed.

Firstly, Letheby argues that psychedelics can enhance the context of discovery, for example by generating new ideas. At the same time, a sober justification is needed before one can accept the insights that may have been gained during the experience. Here, Letheby overlooks some important issues: who is justifying these gained insights? And who is accepting and making the narrative around what can be considered a real insight and what cannot? When experiencing something that can be unintelligible (Letheby 2021: 25, 120), a guide of some kind (maybe a shaman, a therapist or even just a friend depending on the setting) will be present to help interpret what will happen, is happening or did happen. A psychedelic experience can be mystical (ibid.: 25; Gobbi et al. 2022: 719) and confusing (Dupuis 2022B: 211), leaving the individual who went through it questioning what exactly the meaning behind the experience is (ibid.). Who is the authority that will give the answers?

Maybe a team of doctors, psychologists, ritual specialists, and a priest is there to help as is the case at Takiwasi – a shamanic center in the Peruvian Amazon – which is

examined by Dupuis (Dupuis 2022A). This center is partly an addiction treatment clinic, partly a place for Westerners to go and get acquainted with ayahuasca, and it draws ritual and discursive inspiration from both Amazonian tradition, local indigenous shamanism, Catholicism and New Age spirituality (ibid.: 627). In his paper, Dupuis investigates Takiwasi's teachings around psychedelic experiences with ethnographic methods and concludes that the narrative reconstructions and the social interactions in which these teachings are conducted frame the hallucinogenic experience down to the very content of the visuals (ibid.: 634). The narratives, sociality, and culture surrounding these experiences (in this context in group sessions) shape the individuals' attention, emotions, and expectations, thereby creating a specific interpretation and understanding of what a person should extrapolate or learn from the experience. For this reason, it is not only the individual who explores the meaning around the experience. The context of discovery and the context of justification must in this way be influenced by a specific narrative or microclimate (and in some cases an authority in the microclimate).

This becomes very clear through Dupuis' ethnographic work and interviews in Takiwasi. One of the participants told Dupuis:

I mean I don't know, I can't be sure, really know if they are entities or psychological projections. You never know. Sometimes, during ayahuasca sessions, I see an eagle and I have the impression that it is the spiritual protection of my grandmother, but in fact I don't know. But still, when I see the demons it is very clear, they are not vague shadows or my imagination, I see them clearly (Dupuis 2021A: 11).

As Dupuis mentions, and as this quote shows, the strange phenomenology of psychedelic experiences allows for multiple interpretations of the meaning of the object of belief (ibid.). A doubt about how to understand what is unintelligible, yet meaningful to the participant, calls for guidance and interpretation. The participants in Takiwasi, Dupuis points out, will try another psychedelic session to seek answers and thereby commit even more to the ritual and the practice of the place, even when they doubt the authorities of the place (ibid.). In the end, the doubts of how to interpret the experience will eventually align with the authority (ibid.: 8). As Dupuis writes elsewhere: "[The] need for meaning-making leads the participants to seek explanations and makes them particularly receptive to the interactions and suggestions of people perceived as epistemic authorities" (Dupuis 2022B: 211). This shows that the questions from the

paragraph above are highly relevant in epistemological work around psychedelic experiences. This also opens for even bigger discussions about epistemic injustice between patient and therapist or participant in a study and the researcher (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 575; Earp & Yaden 2021: 218), and ethical considerations regarding consent in psychedelic experiences (Timmermann et al. 2022). These discussions are outside the scope of this thesis, though extremely relevant in relation to epistemology of psychedelics as well.

Another important point in reference to the context of discovery comes from feminist philosopher Kathleen Okruhlik and is highlighted by Phoebe Friesen in reference to psychedelics. Though Friesen's point in her paper concerns methodology and philosophy of science around what sort of hypotheses are being examined in psychedelic research in contrast to research in psychosis, I think it can be applied in a more direct epistemological sense as well. As already mentioned, narratives, meaning-making, and interpretations of the experience shape the very phenomenology before, during and after the experience. These interpretations and narratives must limit the epistemological outcome in one way or another. Similar to the hypotheses of a research area that becomes limited by emphasizing certain research questions or pointing participants in certain directions and in this way narrowing the context of discovery (Friesen 2022: 597), the same thing happens in the immediate psychedelic experience. The context of discovery, as Letheby argues is being "set free" so users can "think outside the box", is not as free as one might think. The context of discovery (maybe due to the limit in psychedelic research, as well) can be restricted by the microclimate in which the experience takes place. At the same time, the context of justification can fall onto an authority, overruling the person who has undergone the experience. We see that the epistemological picture is more nuanced than Letheby paints it to be.

Turning to the epistemic benefit of 'knowledge how', which Letheby argues can occur during and after psychedelic experiences, he points to a specific mindset of curiosity, acceptance, and non-resistance that patients are encouraged to adopt (Letheby 2021: 174). This is related to meditation or other mindfulness practices, and Letheby proposes that during psychedelic experiences it can be learned to maintain an open, curious, non-reactive attentional stance (ibid.). This is the knowledge being gained; "knowing how to

pay attention and relate to one's mental contents in decentred, psychologically flexible ways" (ibid.: 175).

As we have already mentioned several times and as argued by Dupuis in his paper, *attention* is part of what affects the phenomenology and outcome of psychedelic experiences. What is consciously or unconsciously paid attention to therefore is part of a ritual around the experience. Attention must, through the lens of "socialization of hallucinations", be narrative- or social-dependent. This becomes clearer when different discourses of psychedelic use are explored. In a new study examining psychedelic internet forums, Holm et al. (2023) found that depending on the situation of the psychedelic experience and the conceptual framework suggested by the surroundings, different expressions about beliefs, norms, knowledge and practices appeared (Holm et al. 2023: 7). What mindset is understood to be the most beneficial (or what is looked at as the best ways to pay attention) during a psychedelic experience differs depending on discourse and your overall understanding of the psychedelic experience. As already pointed out in section 3, if you believe a psychedelic experience to be a spiritual awakening, "the rules" around what mindset you need to be in before, during and after the experience will differ from "the rules" broadly understood around mindset in the recreational discourse of psychedelic use (i.e., using magic mushrooms as a party drug).

Another example of this is highlighted in Zuzanna Sadowska's ethnographic work on substance use in Warsaw, Poland. As is clear through her work:

"[P]eople [...] attached different meanings to this type of substance [psychedelics] than to other psychoactive drugs. Namely, they did not see psychedelics, schedule 1 substances, as "drugs of abuse", but as tools for expanding consciousness, broadening the mind, self-discovery, as well as self-therapy" (Sadowska 2022: 31).

From this, it can be argued that the discourse around what mindset to be in or how to *use* a substance before the experience can influence what might turn out to be lessons or takeaways of these experiences. This is another social aspect of the epistemology of psychedelics that is missed in Letheby's argumentation.

Moving on to knowledge by acquaintance and new knowledge of old facts⁶, the same counterargument can be applied as with context of discovery and justification. As Letheby writes in reference to these two types of knowledge in psychedelic experiences: “[...] critical, sober scrutiny is essential” (Letheby 2021: 190). Again, we could ask: who ends up having authority to say what new knowledge participants have been acquainted with in this highly suggestible and receptive experience in which questions of interpretation and explanation are looked for? In a setting with a guide or a therapist, participants are likely to turn to epistemic authorities (Dupuis 2022B: 211). For Letheby, this social aspect is once again left out. Here, the person in a psychedelic experience is individually experiencing a radically different form of self-modelling, realizing that the previously unquestioned sense of *who I am* is just a story that can be told otherwise (Letheby 2021: 183). But this epistemic search as well as a state of high suggestibility can “support very actively the embodiment of the local cultural model” (Dupuis 2022B: 211), or we could use Hartogsohn and say: psychedelics support the embodiment of the microclimate in which the experience takes place (Hartogsohn 2022).

As Devenot et al. (2022) argue in their narrative analysis of a treatment manual and post-session experience reports from a pilot study of psilocybin-assisted treatment for tobacco smoking cessation, therapeutic frameworks focusing on identity shifts influence narratives of self-transformation in psychedelic experiences – they can even impact the phenomenology of ego dissolution (Devenot et al. 2022: 367), for example by priming participants with specific narrative themes such as getting to know their “real selves” as non-smokers through the transformative experience of ego dissolution (using very loaded concepts of what is understood as *a self* and *an ego dissolution* in this specific psychedelic microclimate, that of a clinical study) (ibid.: section 6). The story of *who I am* that Letheby argues is remodeled during the psychedelic experience is not just told by the individual person during the experience. It might be influenced by a larger narrative of a social group or even on a collective level.

⁶ Of course, much discussion in epistemology since the second half of the 20th century has centered around whether these types of knowledge can even be considered knowledge at all (see Nida-Rümelin & O’Conaill 2021 and Hasan 2020). It is not the aim of this project to go into such discussions here.

The last type of epistemic benefit that Letheby discusses in his book are the indirect epistemic benefits – the epistemic after-effects of the experience. Diving a little bit further into these indirect epistemic benefits and applying what we now know about set and setting in the context of psychedelic experiences, we realize that the argumentation might not be as simple as put forth in the book. Recall the patient from earlier who was convinced that one of his late parents had smothered him as a child. Due to the distress the patient was having, the study team referred him for 10 sessions of extended “integration” (a therapeutic format where the patient and therapist focus on the details of the content that occur during the psychedelic experience). Timmermann et al. points out that the patient was able to reframe his experience in a new way in these sessions (Timmermann et al. 2022: 694). Here is what the patient said about the integration therapy (italics are done by me):

That information [revealed in the smothering scene during the session] was so new and quite useful, *you need to make sense of it*. Integration for me is as important as set and setting. It's important getting to the point of having revelations. Regardless of whether it's true or not, *that information needs to be understood by your consciousness*, it's going to be rattling around: did it happen, didn't it happen, and that's not the point at all. This message has come along, [so] *what does it mean?* (Timmermann et al. 2022: 694).

This shows, as we discussed earlier as well, that the doubts about the experience can lead to questions of what all this ineffable and confusing content really means, how to understand and make sense of it, and, afterwards, maybe to seek out an authority who can help you interpret the experience. This, of course, is not to say that this patient should not have gotten therapeutic help about the experience, but to point out the epistemic consequences following such help. As Timmermann et al. point to, it can be that the integration with a therapist provides new information and knowledge around the psychedelic experience (ibid.). If we recall the theory of Predictive Processing, we would, from this point of view, say that the integration is epistemically enabling. But it is also important to keep in mind that this sort of integration very clearly leaves the patient in a state of handing over the meaning-making and narrative around the experience to what is conceptualized as an epistemic authority, thereby maybe becoming more epistemically constrained than enabled. When adding the social aspect to the psychedelic experience (here, in the aftermath), we once again see that the picture turns out much

more nuanced compared to an experience such as for example redirecting a depressed person to see the world “more clearly” (as in Letheby’s example of post-experience epistemic benefits).

One important point should be emphasized before continuing the discussion. It might be questioned whether this underlining of extrapharmacological influences in psychedelic experiences risks creating a view of psychedelics as brainwashing tools. Historically (especially in the late Cold War era), psychedelic drugs and therapy were feared to be a way of “mind-control” (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 571) and a tool to brainwash – both to scare people away from using these drugs and for governments to legitimize their prohibition (Dupuis 2021A: 3). It has been speculated throughout the 20th century if psychedelics could be used as “mental manipulation”. Both the Schutzstaffel (SS) and the Gestapo in Germany as well as the CIA in the United States have carried out experiments with mescaline and LSD, respectively, trying to create effective ways where these drugs could work to convert enemies to become secret agents, as a means of more effective interrogation, or could improve coercive indoctrination and wartime propaganda. All these experiments were complete failures (Robbins & Anthony 1980).

It is important to remember that psychedelics are not just manipulating tools turning users into robots “devoid of reflexivity and agentivity” or “passive carriers of cultural transmission” who will “assent to a belief system” which correlates with a specific set and setting (Dupuis 2021A:13). It is a misunderstanding to believe that if you ingest a psychedelic substance, then suddenly your viewpoint of the world is completely aligned with a specific ideology.

Instead of this discourse of psychedelics as brainwashing tools, psychedelics are better understood as types of enhancers. As Timmermann et al. (2022) points out:

“[...] participants [in psychedelic retreats and in clinical trials] are mostly aware of things that are consistent with their representations and beliefs, and, in the process of recollection, the original experience may be deformed through the influence of these beliefs and representations” (Timmermann et al 2022: 696).

This is also argued in one of Hartogsohn’s papers, namely that psychedelics have meaning-enhancing properties (Hartogsohn 2018). Along the same lines, Dupuis argues:

“[...] psychedelics might reflect or amplify the dominant values of the individuals that

use them” (Dupuis 2021B). Psychedelics in this framework are looked at as “amplifiers of existing cultural factors” (ibid.). As we have learned, this is (among other things) due to the fact that the influence of set and setting will impact what the psychedelic user focuses on or pays attention to in relation to the experience (Dupuis 2022A: 634).

As a concrete example, we can return to look at Takiwasi. Here, the rituals around the experience will have an impact on the therapeutic outcome of the guests in a direct sense, because the retreat has a strong narrative around what addiction is and how guests will get better; specifically, seeing addiction “as a result of an unresolved spiritual quest” and as an infestation in a very literal way, thereby leading to an understanding of healing as “a direct experience of transcendence”, where the infestation can be cleansed away (Dupuis 2022B: 202). These narratives can have enhancing effects and make sure that participants pay attention to infestations. Furthermore, it might ensure that participants feel a stronger sense of “lessons learned” when an “infestation” is indeed experienced as cleansed away through the psychedelic experience. But this is not the same as brainwashing or mind control which of course is a controversial concept in itself (Dupuis 2021A: 3-4).

Another example would be the narrative analysis of the clinical trial of the smoking cessation study by Devenot et al (2022). As with guides in retreats like Takiwasi, therapeutic experts will in a similar way shape the experiences of individuals in clinical studies to understand themselves through specific narratives of what is seen as healthy and ideal versions of themselves (Devenot et al. 2022: 364). In the narrative analysis, it is highlighted that participants of the study use the same discourse around quitting smoking. This indicates the possibility that they share a framing of how to understand addiction and how to deal with this addiction in a specific way which has been implemented by the experts (ibid. 368). Like the narrative of addiction as infestation being reinforced by rituals and specific spiritual leaders in Takiwasi, the experts in the clinical study understand smoking as “an external agency [...] that has managed to hijack the behavioral system of the smoker” – a discourse which also dominates public health debates (ibid.: 378). Healing is then seen as letting go of this external agent of smoking, and the individuals will be “born anew as a non-smoker” (ibid.: 379) encouraged to experience this through an ego dissolution (ibid.: 381). In the same way as in Takiwasi, it might be that

individuals feel this sense of “lessons learned” when they actually do have an experience of ego dissolution and see themselves as born anew non-smokers. This is, however, not the same as people losing complete agency over the experience, thereby equating it to brainwashing or mind control.

This enhancement or amplifying of beliefs is also clear in reference to the political set and setting we mentioned in section 3. As shown by Pace and Devenot (2021), psychedelics can radicalize people anywhere on the political spectrum depending on existing political beliefs. This is largely due to the suggestibility-effect of psychedelics which is hypothesized to foster social cohesion and reinforce group norms (Pace & Devenot 2021: 6). In this sense, it is important to be critical of claims that suggest that psychedelics lead to “specific, essentialized outcomes” (ibid.). Intertwining these points of political shifts and radicalization, and the identity shifts in Takiwasi and the smoking cessation study, with the concept of psychedelics as active super-placebos from Dupuis and Veissière, the drugs can be thought of as “responsive to and enhancers of placebo effects” (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 573); this includes political beliefs and beliefs about identity. Again, this should not be seen as manipulation of beliefs. Participants are active agents who will probably be more or less likely to be influenced and have different doubts and thoughts around the rituals.

Looking at psychedelic experiences from a sociocultural viewpoint entails that the phenomenology of psychedelic experiences does not just come from the individual. It also means that when psychedelics are shaped by narratives, interpretations, and sociality (both on a collective, microclimatic and individual level), the potential knowledge gain is shaped by these elements as well. The epistemic processes will, to some degree, depend on the framework in which the experience has taken place. To what degree these factors have an influence is difficult to say – especially when there is still so little empirical research regarding these questions. However, at this point, it seems safe to say that social, cultural, historical, and political factors do play a part in psychedelic experiences and epistemology, and this point is missed by Letheby altogether.

To sum up, I have now highlighted a key factor of psychedelic experiences which I think is almost completely neglected in Letheby's book and by many other psychedelic

scholars, both in epistemology of psychedelics and in clinical, psychedelic research; namely that psychedelic experiences are never done in an isolated space and time excluded from social, cultural, historical, and political factors. The weakening of high-level priors (if we are speaking Predictive Processing language) facilitates experiences of heightened suggestibility (Dupuis 2021A). This must also mean a heightened suggestibility to factors of sociality, culture, history, and politics.

When we look at psychedelic experiences in an isolated, individual manner, a huge part of what constitutes and influences the experience is lost. As Brian D. Earp and David B. Yaden conclude in their commentary: “[...] we need to integrate medical and neuroscientific perspectives with a much deeper awareness of the context – cultural, historical, political, and interpersonal – in which psychedelic studies and experiences take place” (Earp & Yaden 2021: 220). In this way, the thorough analysis by Letheby of unbinding and remodeling of the self through a loosening of high-level priors becomes an idealization of psychedelic epistemology and not a *complete* psychedelic epistemology. With this critique and the missing sociocultural aspects of psychedelic experiences in mind, we can now turn to a discussion of more nuanced ways to analyze a realistic (and not just the ideal) epistemology of psychedelics.

5. The psychedelic knower as a situated knower

As of now, it should be clear that the individual to some extent is influenced phenomenologically and therapeutically by set and setting in these hyper-suggestible psychedelic experiences. We have also learned that it follows from this claim that a realistic epistemology of psychedelic must take the set and setting of the psychedelic user into account. Presuming the psychological benefits of the experience is tied to the very phenomenology of the experience as much research suggests (Gobbi et al. 2022: 719, Carhart-Harris et al. 2018), rather than only to some brain chemicals being altered, and because psychological benefits must involve some sort of insight about, for instance, the self, then epistemology must in some way be influenced by set and setting as well (on an individual, microclimatic and collective level).

We have also seen that the main claims of Chris Letheby in *Philosophy of Psychedelics* lack the social, political, cultural, and historical dimensions of what an all-encompassing and not just ideal epistemology of psychedelics must capture in order not to miss important epistemic features. And although David Dupuis has been our guide into understanding these essential sociocultural features of psychedelic experiences throughout our examination, as an anthropologist he is not particularly interested in questions of whether, how and what sort of knowledge can be gained during the experience, but rather how people interact and behave in specific psychedelic subcultures. So, let us turn our attention to what sorts of epistemological theories can capture the sociocultural aspects of psychedelic experiences.

We know that this theory (in contrast to Letheby's theory) must be able to show how social, political, cultural, and historical aspects influence knowledge production on different levels. Because we are in the search for a theory that can break with the individual epistemology that permeates Letheby's book, a natural place to look for an alternative epistemology of psychedelics is in social epistemology. More specifically, I will dive into feminist social epistemology to examine how some of these frameworks might capture the nuances of psychedelic experiences. When doing what we could call social epistemology of psychedelics, there are many undiscovered social epistemological routes we could have taken instead of a feminist route (mostly because almost no psychedelic epistemology has been made besides from Letheby's work). However, I will not be able to provide an exhaustive social epistemology of psychedelics in the limited space I have left of this thesis. I wish to use feminist social epistemology as *one* potential way to hopefully open a wider discussion of how social epistemology can shed light on what actually constitutes a psychedelic experience and psychedelic epistemology.

Before diving into the feminist epistemological resources, however, it is important to mention that I will not examine gendered problems or reflections regarding the topic of psychedelic epistemology (although this project possibly carries gendered implications as well, due to its emphasis on sociocultural aspects).⁷ As mentioned, I wish to show

⁷ For an in-depth scientific theoretical analysis of psychedelic research from a feminist perspective on sociology of knowledge, see Michelle Corbin (2012): "Tactics of Legitimation in the Psychedelic Sciences: Lessons for Feminist Sociology of Knowledge." *The American behavioral scientist (Beverly Hills)*.

that the epistemological theories or frameworks that are interested in a social approach to models of knowers can help shed light on psychedelic epistemology in more fruitful and nuanced ways. In the entry on Feminist Social Epistemology on Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Heidi Grasswick points out that “feminist social epistemologists [have] provided key theoretical resources for understanding the breadth and depth of the social dimensions of knowing” (Grasswick 2018: section 2). As Grasswick has argued elsewhere:

“[...] feminist epistemology can be understood [...] as an overall approach to doing social epistemology – an approach that begins with the idea that knowing is *socially situated* and critically investigates epistemic practices and revisits key epistemological questions with this in mind” (Grasswick 2019: 296).

This is precisely our aim with applying feminist social epistemology to psychedelic epistemology. More specifically, feminist social epistemology can be helpful in other aspects of epistemology than just feminism because it highlights “the socially differentiated nature of knowers” and “[the] social interactive nature” of knowledge production (Grasswick 2018: section 2) – two points relevant outside feminism and specifically to this project. I will try to show that epistemology of psychedelics calls for an analysis of the activity of knowing rather than just strictly analyzing the product of knowledge itself (which I believe is one of Letheby’s problems) – a lesson which feminist social epistemologists have taught us (Grasswick 2019: 298).

In continuation hereof, feminist works of epistemology point to the fact that an epistemic agent or subject must be theorized as a particular epistemic agent situated in social, cultural, political and historical locations as well; it would be missing relevant epistemic features to assume that the subject can be conceptualized as interchangeable and self-sufficient (Grasswick 2018: section 2). Arguments from social feminist epistemology stress that in epistemic examinations it matters “who is doing the knowing, with what interests and investments, and from what social position” (Kukla 2021: 40) and that “having good-quality knowledge can’t be reduced to a matter of individual epistemic self-discipline” (ibid.: 41). This is also a criticism that fits well within this project. We shall return later to the ways in which the feminist frameworks of social epistemology might be less fitting for psychedelic epistemology.

But let us begin with applying this social approach of feminist theory to the psychedelic knower. For instance, the point about the socially differentiated nature of knowers becomes apparent in the example with the woman of color from section 3. It is obvious that the woman describes a very specific experience in reference to drugs that is a result of a specific cultural, social, and political background. In this way, she cannot be said to be an interchangeable epistemic subject, and by theorizing without the point of the socially differentiated nature of knowers in mind, we would indeed be missing relevant epistemic features. This is also in evidence in reference to what we have introduced as the political set and setting. An insight after a psychedelic experience like the following is not gained independently based on an ideological (political and/or spiritual/religious) standpoint:

Through this immanent divine force [God], entrepreneurs envision and actively create new ideas that challenge current thinking, new products that upset existing markets, or, more dramatically, new worlds that supplant old ones (Tvorun-Dunn 2022: 5).

What is seen as, for example, moral enhancement or rewarding for society (like “new products that upset existing markets” in the quote above) depends on the political, spiritual, and cultural framework in which the drugs are taken. This is also the case during psychedelic experiences. In this instance as well, it becomes clear that relevant epistemic features like these must be included if we want to encompass what makes up a complete epistemology of psychedelics.

The point about the social interactive nature of epistemology in reference to psychedelic epistemology becomes apparent through the examples with Takiwasi and the clinical trial of smoking cessation. As we have seen, specific discourse about health and illness, addictive behavior and healing will influence the psychedelic experience down to the very phenomenology (Dupuis 2022A; Devenot et al. 2022). And like feminist epistemologists have taught us, an individual is never self-sufficient in producing knowledge. Rather, epistemology unfolds through specific languages and concepts in specific communities. These languages and concepts are necessary for gaining knowledge but are, at the same time, acquired by individuals who participate in this community or society (Grasswick 2018: section 2.3).

As Zuzanna Sadowska (2022) also concludes in her ethnographic analysis on psychedelic use in Poland:

The constant interaction of a person with their environment causes alterations in their needs, and subsequently, the aims of taking drugs. Therefore, the types of drugs used, the intensity of use, and the significance attributed to them are never fixed (Sadowska 2022: 42).

If we look at Takiwasi with this in mind, the animalistic infestation works as a way of conceptualizing and expressing what happens and how knowledge can be gained during these experiences. However, the concept of infestation is tied to this specific community of Takiwasi where participants acquire this language to articulate and understand their mystical experience. That this conceptualization is tied to the community becomes even more clear when looking at how the participants from Takiwasi change their views on their experiences when returning home. As Dupuis says: “Influenced by this context [the prohibition of ayahuasca in France], many participants, when they return home to their country, gradually experience doubts about their Peruvian experience [...]” (Dupuis 2022B: 212). In this example as well, we see that the aim and significance of the drug use is, indeed, never fixed, but fluid and everchanging depending on context.

Here, we can again bring in Hartogsohn's concept of microclimates. As he argues, a narrower cultural climate or subculture has distinct sets of interpretative schemes that shape psychedelic experiences (Hartogsohn 2022: 580); meaning specific concepts and languages. If we add the point about individuals acquiring their concepts by participating in the said community, we could say that the interpretative schemes have an impact not just on specific psychedelic experiences, but on the psychedelic subculture or microclimate as well. Individuals and microclimates have intricate interrelationships that highlight the social interactive nature of psychedelic epistemology.

Another point from the feminist works on epistemology that can help shed light on a social epistemology of psychedelics is the feminist concept of perspective. Not just because it highlights the different ways in which specific discourses, views, or perspectives impact, for instance, the integration of the psychedelic experience, but also because we are dealing with a visual and otherwise perceptual experience, and these very visuals also influence what kind of knowledge might be gained. The feminist point is

articulated very clearly by Grasswick: “[...] experimental differences lead to differences in perspective, and these perspectival differences carry epistemic consequences” (Grasswick 2018: section 2.1). In the same way, the psychedelic experience is loaded with “a view”, and the epistemology of the experience is connected to this view.⁸

This is also an argument brought out by Donna Haraway in her well-known article *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988). Haraway uses a metaphor of the (scientific) eye throughout the article in order to paint a picture of “specific ways of seeing” (Haraway 1988: 583). And although her arguments in the article mostly revolve around philosophy of science and as an attack on the myth of an impartial view-from-nowhere (what Haraway calls “the god trick”) in science (Grasswick 2018: section 3), these arguments are relevant in reference to this thesis as well, because they underline the objectivity that lies in particularity in epistemic examinations without turning to a form of relativism (Rogowska-Stangret 2018).

Connecting this to psychedelic experiences and epistemology, we could say that just as perceptual systems (both an organic eye and the “scientific eye”) are *active* rather than passive (Haraway 1988: 583), so is a hallucination. Active in the sense that viewpoints are ever-changing and never static – “actively organizing the world” (Rogowska-Stangret 2018). Insisting on hallucinations or psychedelic experiences as being impartial, because we think these experiences can be reduced and understood in the old-fashioned “objective” sense, leads us to miss important epistemic factors. Therefore, we might translate this metaphor of particular perspectives, eyes, binoculars or microscopes into “specific ways of hallucinating”. By underlining the particularity of a psychedelic experience (*specific* ways of hallucinating), we are actually more likely to reach an objective epistemological theory of psychedelics, at the same time rejecting that every epistemic subject going through a psychedelic experience is the same, i.e., is

⁸ In much feminist social epistemology, “perspective” is understood as an “achieved stance”. This achieved epistemic stance is typically acquired by political engagement which makes the oppressed subject more epistemically privileged (though not always), for example being more prone to notice systematic power relations in society (Grasswick 2018: section 2.1). However, in this section of my thesis I am more interested in emphasizing the aspect of sociality which interconnects with epistemology and the epistemic consequences that follow when this aspect is neglected.

interchangeable. As Haraway points to: “But it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests” (Haraway 1988: 584). Focusing on subjective experiences does not mean that our theory is a form of relativism and therefore should be seen as invalid, quite the opposite.

Another point in reference to the metaphor of vision and situated knowledge applicable to this project concerns “self-knowledge”. This is relevant because Letheby rests many (if not all) of his arguments on this sort of knowledge (Letheby 2021: see chapter 5, 7, 8). It becomes clear when exploring Haraway’s theory that “[...] vision does not produce a sense of self-presence / self-knowledge / self-identity” (Rogowska-Stangret 2018). Translating the metaphor to that of hallucinations, it could be said in the same sense that hallucinations do not produce self-knowledge. In knowledge processes (including processes of self-knowledge), questions such as the following must be answered:

"How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinded? Who wears blinders? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory powers do we wish to cultivate besides vision?" (Haraway 1988: 587).

In the same way as scientific knowledge, self-knowledge has blind spots that we must be aware of. It is through these blind spots and in connection with culture, sociality, politics, and history that a complete epistemology of psychedelics appears. A good exercise when doing social epistemology of psychedelics could be to change the words “see”, “visions”, and “visual” to “hallucinate” in the questions in the above quote to check for blind spots in this specific social epistemology. Again, this clarifies the necessity of analyzing epistemic features in the particular while at the same time focusing on larger sociocultural aspects that influence epistemology.

In contrast, the idealization of epistemology of psychedelics that I have highlighted a few times builds upon the misunderstanding and myth of the view-from-nowhere: believing that all psychedelic experiences can be lumped together. As all knowledge production (Kukla 2021: 60), the psychedelic experience is a social enterprise. By insisting on the psychedelic knower as a situated knower, psychedelic epistemology becomes an epistemology that can capture what is actually happening before, during, and after the

psychedelic experience. Again, my project is in no way an exhaustive social epistemology of psychedelics, but an opening and invitation into a broader examination of social, cultural, historical, and political aspects of psychedelic experiences and the epistemic outcomes of such experiences.

However, we also need to consider the ways in which this particular social epistemological theory might *not* fit so well with the epistemic outcomes of psychedelic experiences. Up until now, we have been picking and choosing to make the frameworks of feminist social epistemology fit with the epistemology of psychedelics. While these frameworks can help us capture the social, cultural, political, and historical aspects that are relevant features for epistemic inquiry in these types of experiences (that is, descriptive questions), we must also examine the normative role of the epistemic features of psychedelic experiences; like Letheby, we must ask whether the insights coming from psychedelic experiences are epistemic benefits or harms in the light of this social epistemological analysis. As is probably obvious, my objective with using feminist social epistemology is solely applying the perspectival nature of knowing and the community-specific elements of epistemic inquiry to psychedelic experiences and their epistemology. As mentioned earlier, gendered social relations are not my main concern.

Because many feminist social epistemologists focus on the structures of oppression, specific epistemic perspectives, like that of minorities or women, will be seen as more valuable than others (at least in cases where oppression is the focus) (Grasswick 2019: 295). If we therefore directly applied the normative aspects of feminist social epistemology to psychedelic experiences, this would entail a conclusion where “specific ways of hallucinating”, for instance, a woman’s psychedelic experience would be more valuable than that of a man. I am not going to completely write off that this could be the case in some instances. However, as we have seen and pointed out many times now, the psychedelic experience comes with a big amount of suggestibility. This is why the experience can be what Dupuis calls “a vector for cultural transmission and affiliation to the social group” (Dupuis 2022A: 634). For this reason, it would be too rash of a decision just to transfer in its entirety feminist social epistemology that mainly has a focus onto oppressive structures to epistemology of psychedelic experiences.

Of course, it would be a simplification of feminist epistemology to impute to it that in all cases, women and minorities are more privileged knowers (in the sense that they always have more epistemic insight into for example an oppressive situation). Epistemic contexts differ (Grasswick 2019: 296), and the psychedelic experience might be one such context where we still do not understand in what way and to what extent they differ due to the limited empirical research. Haraway also emphasizes this point around epistemic context: a social and cultural situation (we could add political and historical) will always shape and limit a situated knower's access to epistemic inquiry (Haraway 1988: 583). We can liken this statement to the statement of predictive processing from section 2: prior knowledge is always both constraining and enabling, it makes us function in the world, but it also keeps us stuck in the same patterns. In psychedelic experiences, it might be that sociocultural influences constrain rather than enable.

In any case, psychedelic experiences probably are much more constraining than what has been believed to be the case so far (with Letheby being an example of one who has put too much emphasis on the enabling of epistemic inquiry through psychedelic experiences); meaning that it would be flawed to see the psychedelic experience as just “a freeing of the mind”, be that in a spiritual, metaphysical or epistemic sense. Instead, it seems that much more of what makes up the psychedelic experience is dependent on sociocultural aspects than what is suggested by Letheby. As mentioned in the introduction, the overly optimistic ‘psychedelic therapy bubble’ must burst (at least in psychedelic epistemology) if we want to understand what a psychedelic experience actually constitutes.

In continuation of this, I argue that it is specifically in the sociocultural that we must look to understand this constraining part of these experiences, hence my use of social epistemology to unfold a realistic epistemology of psychedelics. Again, it is difficult to say to what extent exactly the sociocultural plays a role at this point, and therefore it is also difficult to answer normative questions around what epistemic harms or benefits actually occur before, during and after these experiences. But I have now laid out some groundwork of what an analysis of psychedelic epistemology with emphasis on social, cultural, political, and historical aspects might look like as an antithesis to Letheby's arguments in his book. Mainly, a realistic epistemology of psychedelic must consider the

socially differentiated nature of knowers and the social interactive nature of knowledge production for it to grasp the complexities of the knowledge processes which occur before, during, and after these types of experiences. Furthermore, and in connection with the aforementioned points, it might be helpful to use the concept of perspective from Haraway to understand that hallucinations, in the same way as visions, carry with them specific points of views and blind spots. Combined, this shows that to focus on the particular (psychedelic experience and user) is necessary if we wish to create an epistemology of psychedelics which realistically can encompass all epistemic features that are impacted and intricately intertwined with sociality, culture, politics, and history.

Before concluding on my overall findings, however, I want to explore another route that could be helpful for psychedelic philosophy to take. This more speculative section will work as a tentative and general discussion of the ontology of psychedelics and the epistemological implications of this potential ontology. Because specific ontologies carry with them specific epistemological consequences, I will argue that taking a step back from epistemology and asking how psychedelics and the experiences that come with taking these drugs manifest themselves in the world can also work as an argument for a social epistemological approach to psychedelic experiences.

6. The psychedelic drug as a psychedelic technology

In addition to our arguments for a social approach to psychedelic epistemology through an examination and expansion of what constitutes set and setting as concepts, we might turn to ontology. If an ontological examination of psychedelic drugs and the experiences that follow from ingesting them turned out to contain these social, cultural, political, and historical aspects, then it would follow that a social epistemology of psychedelics would be necessary to understand the epistemic features of these experiences. In other words, if psychedelic drugs can only manifest themselves in the world through sociality, culture, politics, and history, then our epistemology of these drugs must also be able to capture these aspects. In this sense, we would be able to underline why epistemology of psychedelics from an ontological standpoint could not be understood fully by overlooking sociocultural aspects of the psychedelic experience.

From this point of view, I think it would be helpful to look at psychedelics as technologies intertwined with our lived bodies rather than an object detached from us. In this current section (as with the rest of my thesis), I am not trying to make an exhausted ontology nor epistemology of psychedelics. My aim with this examination is rather to curiously investigate other ways of understanding psychedelic drugs than as artifacts outside or disconnected from our continuously lived bodies. This may in turn open the door and lay the ground for other epistemological theories of explaining epistemic outcomes of psychedelic experiences than an epistemology of psychedelics that overlap with individual and traditional epistemology.

As we have already seen, the effects of psychedelics are in many instances, and particularly in clinical trials, looked at as something that comes from the drugs themselves. But like we discussed in section 4, this view would be wrong, among other things, because different discourses of psychedelic use lead to different beliefs, norms, practices, and knowledge around what an ideal psychedelic experience is (Holm et al. 2022). At the same time, psychedelics do carry their own effects due to neuropharmacological properties (Dupuis 2021B), e.g., the geometric visuals that have been detected cross-culturally (Dupuis & Veissière 2022: 573). For this reason, it would also be wrong to neglect the essential factor of the material that is both the drugs and our bodies. In this sense, psychedelics and the experiences that come with taking these drugs must encompass the concrete material aspects *and* discursive and social components that intricately make up the phenomenology and epistemic takeaways of the experience. How are we to understand this interconnectedness?

Like Dupuis has considered, this might turn us in the direction of thinking of psychedelic drugs as technologies (Dupuis 2021B). This is because these drugs, like other pharmaceuticals, (that can also be considered as technologies (Haraway 1994: 83) or technological objects (Simon 2019)), fit into an understanding of technology not as artifacts outside the lived body, but as something that unfolds in the material body (Barla 2018). In his essay, Dupuis does not expand on this concept of 'psychedelic technologies' but argues that thinking of psychedelics in this light can help us understand the extrapharmacological factors (set and setting) of the psychedelic experience as an intertwining of the material, discursive and social aspects (Dupuis 2021B).

I agree with Dupuis and think that the understanding of psychedelics as technologies can help us see why it is so difficult to distinguish where the psychedelic drug as a material substance begins and where it ends in the experience. And though it could be argued that looking at psychedelics through the lens of technology is flawed, because nature by itself produces psychedelics like magic mushrooms, this argument seems to be grounded in a very traditional way of understanding technology as man-made things like machines or cars (Simon 2019: 52). Diving into an ontology of psychedelic technologies might also help us figure out why these experiences are so subjective, why they appear to us through specific cultural, social, political, and historical conditions, and why this also entails very subjective epistemic takeaways of these experiences. Let us discuss, quite generally, in which way the ontological concept of technologies can help answer such questions.

In the context of psychedelic technologies, I think it could be useful to use the image of the cyborg as Haraway does in *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (first published in 1985).⁹ Along the same lines as we saw Dupuis hinting at psychedelic technologies being both discursive and material, Haraway points out how humans are infiltrated and fused with technologies in such a way that there no longer exists a clear distinction between body and technology: “The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (Haraway 1994: 83) or “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (ibid.). In merging with technology, we are both affected materially (by for example the chemicals of LSD) and by our imagination (in our case, sociocultural factors permeating our fantasies, our fiction or ‘the socialization of hallucinations’). The (psychedelic) cyborg as a term transcends “the dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in social practices” (ibid.: 89). Of course, Haraway’s arguments work as a feminist point, but once again, these arguments can be used outside feminist ontology and epistemology. As in many parts of society where we try to make clear boundaries, borders in psychedelic research are desperately held onto, for example what can count as extrapharmacological factors like set and setting and what counts as

⁹ I am aware that Haraway herself has criticized the image of the cyborg in later years from a feminist standpoint (Barla 2017). These are not discussions I am interested in here. I am more interested in using the cyborg in the context of psychedelic experiences to show that if these drugs can be seen as technologies, it carries epistemic consequences.

neurobiological factors – maybe this very thesis falls into this trap. It is worth remembering that by insisting on making clear distinctions on where the effects of the drugs start and end, we are neglecting and overlooking that drugs can never be done in a vacuum. Doing drugs is also always writing fiction.

This does not mean that it is impossible to determine where *body* and *technology* start and end, respectively, rather that this cannot be determined in advance (Barla 2018). This is a lesson that can be learned when carrying the image of the cyborg onto psychedelic technologies. This also fits well with an understanding of technology as not really existing on its own beyond humans (ibid.). In the same sense, it could be argued that psychedelics as hallucinating technologies do not really exist beyond humans, but only in interplay with us. A psychedelic technology is like any other technology an embodied technology. If these ontological claims of psychedelics as technologies and psychedelic users as psychedelic cyborgs are sound and valid, they also carry epistemological implications. Like situated knowledge, Haraway's cyborgs resist sameness or interchangeability. With the (psychedelic) cyborg, it becomes apparent that a particular human using this (psychedelic) technology is experiencing or hallucinating in a very particular and subjective way hence forcing us again to take seriously the claims from feminist social epistemology of the socially differentiated nature of knowers and the social interactive nature of knowledge production in psychedelic epistemology.

It could be argued that this project in itself is undermined by the image of the psychedelic cyborg. Am I not trying to clearly distinguish and make borders of what set and setting entail thereby also overlooking important factors that may impact the experience? In answer to this I would say that I am not trying to define set and setting, but rather put an emphasis on the importance of these concepts in the psychedelic experience and to expand what is understood by the concepts. In my point of view, by starting with an ontology of psychedelics as technologies intertwined with sociality, culture, politics, history, *and* materiality, it also implies a social approach to psychedelic epistemology which rightly encapsulates what epistemic features relates to these experiences. If psychedelic drugs from an ontological viewpoint is understood as social, cultural, political, historical, and material technologies, our epistemology of these drugs must also be able to capture these aspects of the ontology.

7. Conclusion

We can now return to the main argument and aim of this thesis: to show that important epistemic aspects of psychedelic epistemology can be captured only by adopting a more social approach. The foundation of this argument focused on an expansion of the two concepts of set and setting in psychedelic research to encompass social, cultural, political, and historical influences supported by ethnographic and anthropological findings – an approach to both set and setting and psychedelic research as a whole that has been poorly represented in recent years. It was demonstrated that the phenomenology of psychedelic experiences as well as the epistemic claims that come from these experiences are heavily impacted by set and setting, for instance narratives or discourses around what psychedelic drugs and experiences are, rituals, attention, language, and conceptions, shape and structure what is expected, later interpreted, and taken away from the experience. This is partly due to the fact that these experiences are hyper-suggestible and at the same time ineffable and noetic.

By using this expansion of set and setting, we were able to argue that the common framing of epistemology of psychedelics based on an individualistic and traditional view of epistemological examinations, and more specifically, the psychedelic epistemology of Letheby in his book, *Philosophy of Psychedelics*, is flawed, because it cannot capture these necessary epistemic (and sociocultural) features of set and setting that are at play in psychedelic experiences. For this reason, an individual epistemology of psychedelics becomes an idealized rather than a realistic or complete psychedelic epistemology. To overcome this idealization, I suggest a social epistemology of psychedelics in which the focus is not just on the specific epistemic agent, but on the agent situated in a specific social, cultural, political, and historical context. In this thesis, I have sketched out the feminist theory of situated knowledge as *one* possible social epistemological theory that can capture that a psychedelic knower is also always a situated knower, simultaneously being socially differentiated and socially interactive in psychedelic knowledge production. In continuation hereof, I also examined another route to argue for a social approach to psychedelic epistemology, namely by beginning with an ontology of psychedelics as technologies, and the psychedelic user as a psychedelic cyborg. This ontology is able to

intertwine material, social, cultural, political, and historical aspects of the drugs and the users, while it also implies a social epistemology of psychedelics as well.

If my arguments are coherent, this social approach to epistemology of psychedelics is essential in future psychedelic research if we wish to understand what a psychedelic experience is and what a (realistic, social) epistemology of psychedelics consists of. Or more specifically, we need to investigate what factors impact the psychedelic experience, how the experience impacts us, what sort of suggestibility is involved in psychedelic experiences, and what precautions are necessary to take to assure safe use. Hopefully, this thesis is only the beginning of further investigations working towards a social epistemology of psychedelics.

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