

Ethics and LSD

WALTER HOUSTON CLARK*

There are two basic sources from which to derive ethical standards for the use of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and other psychedelic drugs. First, there are considerations arising from normal social consensus, which demand that any tool or process be designed and used in such a way that society will benefit and will not be harmed. LSD can be seen as a tool to be used in some manner or other to achieve social benefit, such as pleasure, religious experience or psychotherapy. A typical statement related to ethical procedures in general and also to the use of drugs in particular may be found in *Ethical Standards of Psychologists* (American Psychological Association 1979). If harm results from the use of LSD, as has occasionally been the case, then it should be demonstrated that the drug's benefits outweigh its dangers. The second and more radical source of ethics is an extension of the first and will be examined in the second part of this article.

At first glance these principles would seem to put a forthright veto on any use of LSD or its near relatives. The general public has been frightened by a medley of accounts of LSD-related disasters pouring from media and cautionary lectures delivered to young and old alike. As a result, most people are horrified by even a suggestion that LSD has wholesome and promising aspects. Furthermore, conventional thinking—secure in the conviction that only ignorance can bring—insists that LSD and other similar drugs are dangerous narcotics with no therapeutic

medical uses.

As a matter of fact, systematic studies dating back to the early 1940's have shown that, particularly in responsible hands, risks with LSD are minimal. Sidney Cohen (1960) summarized reports from 44 investigators covering results from about 5,000 persons, both mentally ill patients and healthy individuals who had been given LSD a total of 25,000 times. In the latter group, there were no reported suicides and the incidence of psychoses lasting longer than 48 hours was 0.8 per thousand. Among mentally ill patients, suicides were reported at the rate of 0.4 per thousand and psychoses lasting longer than 48 hours were reported in 1.8 per thousand administrations.

In another study (Clark & Funkhouser 1970) carried out among physicians and psychotherapists showed that the closer the practitioners had come to systematic experimentation with LSD, the safer they thought it was—although most recommended careful supervision. Of the 617 researchers and professionals who answered a questionnaire, only four reported suicides, which were all by mentally ill patients. At the same time, 25 respondents stated that they had observed alleviation of suicidal urges. From these data one could conclude that on balance LSD, properly used, appears to actually reduce the danger of suicide.

In addition, a somewhat less ambitious study was also conducted by this author that scrutinized over 500 individuals who had ingested psychedelic chemicals—100 of whom were carefully and systematically surveyed via questionnaire. Some of these subjects had taken the drugs under what were judged to be irresponsible con-

*Professor of Psychology of Religion (Retired), Andover Newton Theological School. Please address reprint requests to the author at 21 Wildwood Drive, Cape Elizabeth, Maine 04107.

ditions, yet generally their reports seemed not out of line with Cohen's results. One subject, for example, spoke of a breakdown that may have lasted longer than 48 hours. Yet the same subject spoke very enthusiastically about the benefit of the experience because it brought problems from his unconscious to the surface where he could deal with them more rapidly and efficiently. Another subject reported experiences of phlegm and blood filling his lungs, which were interpreted to be a birth memory, similar to those described by Grof (1976) in his book *Realms of Human Unconscious*. The experience had at first alarmed the subject, particularly when the doctors he consulted had not helped him, but after a few weeks the symptoms subsided. Based on Grof's theories, one could conjecture that further doses of LSD might have brought the young man successfully through the crisis. As it was, he complained of the coldness and lack of understanding shown him during his overnight stay at his college infirmary.

Another student was thrown into a panic by a bad trip when he took LSD alone in his room. He went to the university health service for help and the alarm of a staff psychiatrist only worsened the panic and led to a week of extreme tension. Finally he visited a psychiatrist experienced with psychedelic drugs who calmed his fears and restored his perspective in about 20 minutes.

Other problems with the drugs mentioned by respondents were definitely minor. There were no reports of either suicides or attempted suicides and several cases of the alleviation of suicidal urges were reported. Nearly all of the more than 500 subjects were pleased that they had taken the drugs. Only a few were neutral and two were negative about their experiences. Many psychiatrists make the point that experiences following LSD ingestion are unpredictable. One could agree with this general estimate based on available research data, but there is one outcome that can be predicted with a very high degree of accuracy, especially for cases in which the drug is pure and an experienced guide is in charge. And that is, whatever the reason for the ingestion, the subject will be glad that s/he took the drug and had the experience.

Another danger associated with LSD that has received much publicity is the claim that it causes injury and deformation to the fetus when the mother has ingested the drug (Cohen, Marinello & Back 1967). Probably the publication of this frequently cited report was motivated in part by the desire to warn young people against the irresponsible use of psychedelic drugs. However, subsequent research has demonstrated that the danger is exaggerated (Grinspoon & Bakalar 1979). It is true that animal studies have indicated that if LSD is injected into the bloodstream at certain periods in early pregnancy there is

the possibility of damage to the fetus. There are a larger number of spontaneous abortions and deformities, but there is no indication of genetic damage (Long 1972; Dishotsky et al. 1971). However, it turns out that almost any drug, including caffeine and alcohol, may have a similar effect under similar conditions (Grinspoon & Bakalar 1979). There is no indication that LSD use by the father at any time or by the mother late in pregnancy will result in this kind of harm. But there is no doubt that any mother wishing to give full protection to an unborn child should stay away from any drug that is not specifically prescribed by her physician during pregnancy.

There is another noteworthy hazard in regard to the use of LSD and other hallucinogens. And that is, obviously, the danger in engaging in the operation of any machinery, such as driving a car, when under the influence of any consciousness-altering drug.

Information such as the foregoing suggests that the individual has the ethical responsibility to use care when taking LSD or other psychedelic drugs. But there is also a responsibility to keep one's mind critically open, lest many hopeful and creative uses of these drugs be prematurely foreclosed. Additionally, it is also the responsibility of all psychiatrists, psychotherapists and mental health professionals to inform themselves of the phenomenology of LSD, lest their advice and ministrations to users in trouble do more harm than good.

Two such cases have already been cited where the actions of professionals appeared to cause at least temporary confusion and harm in situations that should have defused or at least diminished considerably the alarm and tension felt by the patients. In the case of panic brought on by a bad trip, the alarm showed by the subject's psychiatrist at the university health center was a factor in extending the patient's panic and tension over an entire week. On the other hand, the knowledge of the second psychiatrist, who had done research with the drugs and had in fact tried them himself, supplied the background that should have been part of the training of the first psychiatrist, particularly because he had been employed to care for students. Ironically, the latter worked under a director of health services who was so frightened by secondhand reports that he tried to make sure that none of his professional staff had ever taken LSD.

It would seem that the ignorance displayed by the directors and staff in both of these cases was little short of unethical. A modicum of natural curiosity and sense of professional responsibility on the part of any of the professionals would have qualified them to help rather than harm the patients who frequently came in with reports of bad trips.

Both of these cases occurred in the early 1960's,

about the time that public hysteria was leading to a rash of laws that resulted in the almost complete interdiction of any use of LSD, either rational or irrational. Both of the admitting physicians had previously had the opportunity to learn more about LSD research. Moreover, the director of the university health services had been particularly concerned about the situation, yet he had never availed himself of the opportunity to witness and study even one of the experimental administrations of LSD or other similar drugs that had been taking place on the university campus where he served.

Although examples of this type of negligence are still prevalent today, they are less widespread due to the fact that many of the new generation of psychotherapists attended college and medical school when psychedelic experimentation was common, and thus many have had firsthand experience with such drugs. Also, fewer cases of bad trips that cause problems are seen in clinics. The fact that irresponsible experimentation with LSD and other psychedelic drugs has diminished and that greater sophistication about psychedelics is to be found both in and out of hospitals and mental health clinics has led to this result.

If physicians or healers consider it their duty to diminish human suffering when the opportunity is presented, it would seem that they are ethically bound to consider the claims of those who have responsibly investigated the possibilities of LSD and similar drugs. Many such researchers have reported that personal problems could be alleviated at a very deep level. For example, it is well known that LSD has helped many people to face death with peace of mind and that this improvement in attitude has also reacted beneficially on the experience of pain. While this effect does not take place with all patients, about 75 percent report some improvement (Grof & Halifax 1977), and many of these report that improvement has been dramatic and long lasting. Much of this research was done at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore with terminal cancer patients. At the University of Chicago, Kast and Collins (1964) compared the length of time severely ill patients suffering from terminal cancer were free from pain after a low dose of LSD, as compared with conventional analgesics. They found that LSD was 10 times as effective.

Obviously, however, with laws and bureaucratic regulations what they are and the views of the medical establishment so adverse to almost any experimentation (Clark et al. 1975), one cannot expect professional therapists and physicians to risk their careers by breaking laws in order to carry on the experimentation that needs to be done or the humane therapy that can be advanced so much more rapidly with LSD and other similar drugs. Richards

Berendes (1977-78) have demonstrated therapeutic effects of LSD in a notable case report, while Roquet and colleagues (1975) have described the use of such drugs in notably effective and efficient psychoanalytically-based therapy developed in Mexico.

It is indeed deplorable that there are so few physicians sufficiently dedicated to following up these promising findings, and that there is such ignorance, timidity and lethargy in governmental bureaucracy. The result is that very little effective research has been done in these areas recently, as compared with 20 years ago. The situation speaks of a humanitarian insensitivity and a passive ethical dullness that is hard to understand. As Grinspoon and Bakalar have noted in their excellent book *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered* (1979: 231): "Psychedelic drugs were used for more than fifteen years by hundreds of competent psychiatrists who considered them relatively safe as therapeutic agents, and no one has effectively challenged this opinion."

The 1979 revision of the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Ethical Standards of Psychologists* states that "investigations of human participants using drugs should be conducted only in such settings as clinics, hospitals, or research facilities maintaining appropriate safeguards for the participants." It has been previously stated that among the uses to which LSD can be put are those of an agent for pleasure, psychotherapy and religion. While the APA's standards are completely appropriate for psychologists conducting research in psychotherapy and other areas, would they be suitable for LSD use in the pursuit of pleasure? This question will need to be answered should LSD ever be societally condoned for pleasurable pursuits in addition to its use as a research tool and psychotherapeutic agent.

In the meantime, the social rules for the pursuit of pleasure do not differ so much from those governing the activities of psychotherapists, so essentially the same ethical principles apply. If any form of pleasure is harmful to the person participating or to others, it merits ethical condemnation. Considering the abuse of perfectly legal, but more dangerous drugs, such as alcohol or nicotine, it is hard to ethically condemn the pleasure sometimes enjoyed from LSD, except on legal grounds.

But it is LSD's religious agency that demands a different ethical treatment and raises issues that become puzzling and ambiguous. William James considered the mystical consciousness the "mother sea and fountainhead of all religions" (Allen 1967: 425). In the chapter on mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James (1902) described a personal experiment with nitrous oxide, the popular psychedelic of his day, from which he gained cogent insights into the nature of mysti-

cism. W.T. Stace (1960: 71), late member of Princeton University's Philosophy Department, made clear in his book *Mysticism and Philosophy* his cautious belief that an LSD-type drug, mescaline, triggered mysticism in a particular case that he cited. This author's own conviction is that LSD and similar drugs can facilitate profound religious experiences of a mystical nature (Clark 1969). This has been confirmed through personal experiences dating back to 1962, but especially through participation in an American Indian peyote ceremony and a Mazatec session with sacred mushrooms.

The mystical consciousness, as all mystics and most students of mysticism know, raises ethics to a higher plain. The experience seems to have a value in its own right, which the nonmystic often can neither share nor understand. It comes to be pursued for its own sake. This is why, in the eyes of ecclesiastic politicians—and ordinary politicians as well—it is so dangerous. It is the pursuit of the ultimately satisfying experience of the unity of all peoples and all things, the most captivating and transforming of all human experiences. It is the search that makes heroes and martyrs of weak men and women who can make so profound a mark on a small society or even a large one that it will never again be quite the same. It is the assertion of this human right that compels those in power to respect religious experience at the same time that they fear it. And it is the assertion of this fundamental right that forces power to make a place for it, as has been done in the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights by granting freedom of the exercise of religion.

A good example of the effect that LSD and similar drugs may have on personality is that of six convicts, five armed robbers and one rapist, who were incarcerated at a state maximum security prison in Concord, Massachusetts. This author first encountered this group in March 1962. Two of the leaders of the inmate population, along with about 30 others, volunteered for an experiment with psilocybin, an LSD-type drug first derived from a Mexican mushroom. By the time of the encounter only the six remained incarcerated; most of the others had served their shorter sentences and had been released.

One of the leaders described in detail his most cogent experience with the drug. He had seen a vision of Christ carrying the cross toward Calvary. After the vision faded, he remarked that "I looked out of the window and all my life came before my eyes and I said, 'What a waste!'" This was the turning point in this convict's life. Afterward he and his close companion, who was also a volunteer in the experiment and an associate in controlling the inmate population, formed a group within the prison to rehabilitate themselves and others.

After befriending these six men it was possible to

follow their careers for a number of years. They had been perennial recidivists, and the two leaders had a reputation for being among the most difficult and violent of all the convicts in Massachusetts. Before losing track of them, all had been out of jail for six to 14 years and none had returned.

It cannot be said that mystical experience, whether or not triggered by LSD or similar drugs, invariably makes a crooked man straight or a saint from a murderer. Confirmatory evidence is needed, and positive results are more often seen after consistent effort and actual practice of the resolutions made under the euphoria of a profound religious experience. Obviously it was not the experience alone that converted the hardened and cynical convict. It was also the personality of Timothy Leary, from whose fertile mind had come the idea for the experiment (Leary & Clark 1963). Then at Harvard and in charge of the investigation, Leary became the first person the convict had ever really trusted. Then there was the experience of organizing and following up his resolves through what later came to be known as the Self Development Group.

However, none of this convict's transformation would have been possible without the psilocybin sessions. It was his sixth session in particular. Ironically, he and his companion had volunteered for the experiment in order to get control of it: to gain the power to dictate who would and would not be allowed to volunteer. But the drug released powerful urges buried deep within his unconscious and broke through his tough-guy defenses until the idealism that he had unknowingly been carrying around with him all his life came to expression. Before that he had never been out of jail for more than a few months since his first arrest for stealing a car at the age of 11. The man had been a professed atheist, yet few Christians have had an experience as fateful and cogent as his. When he was released from jail at the age of 40, one of his friends offered him a job in the loan business at \$300 a week. "I was tempted," he stated, "for I had no money. But I knew that if I took the job I would lose the inner freedom I had acquired at the time of my vision."

Since the association with the Self Development Group this author has met several other convicts, both at Concord State Prison and elsewhere, who reported that LSD and similar drugs have helped them to leave the criminal world in order to embrace a law-abiding self-respect. They all had secured LSD illegally within prison. A number of convicts have agreed that it is important to convert the most difficult type first: those who have refused to be treated like animals and therefore have retained their self-respect, no matter how twisted. These individuals are leaders among the prison populations. Because they themselves have converted through

psychedelic ingestion, they see no reason why others cannot be converted, and they lead others in that direction. This was the intent behind the Self Development Group.

Subsequently, while a consultant to the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, this author drew up a wider and more careful research plan to follow up Leary's very successful pilot project. Unfortunately, the research design has only been gathering dust for years.

The particular and detailed account of these men illustrates the fact that LSD may have an effect on some people that is quite contrary to its popular image. How irresponsible is the desperate criminal who, anxious as s/he is to climb the prison walls to freedom, longs even more for freedom from those antisocial urges within him/herself that make him/her a recidivist. Those who took the drug from Leary took it legally, but what about the three or four other convicts who took it on their own and so freed themselves from lives of crime. Was this act basically ethical or unethical? As has been previously noted, the U.S. Constitution assures every citizen the freedom to worship in his/her own way. What if that way involves the ingestion of drugs, which despite the fact that they are not unduly dangerous, are proscribed so harshly that the penalty for using them is often more severe than that for certain types of murder? At the very least one must acknowledge considerable ambiguity in such cases.

It seems that at the present time such activity would require membership in a well-established religious institution that is accepted by the more respected elements in society and eventually the courts. Unfortunately, these elements of social control do not readily understand the use of an active sacrament, such as that probably used by Aristotle, the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius and other famous Romans and Greeks in the Eleusian mystery religious rites during the Classical Ages (Clark 1978; Wasson, Ruck & Hofmann 1978).

Moreover, there does exist an established church today that uses a hallucinogenic plant in its rituals. The Native American Church, a group of American Indians numbering in the hundreds of thousands, customarily use peyote in religious rites that have been handed down by their ancestors over centuries. There was a time when government and local police, pressured by Christian missionaries who sometimes found the Indians difficult to convert, arrested and jailed members of the Church. But gradually over time the Indians have been supported by several social scientists who have testified in court that the Indians are sincere and have demonstrated that peyote helps them particularly in their perennial battle against alcohol abuse, to build their tribal communities and to live responsible lives. Some of these rites are syncretic and are carried out within a Christian context with quotations

from the Christian Bible. In general, the courts have ruled favorably on the Native American Church's use of peyote (La Barre 1975).

In 1967, the Church of the Awakening—founded and headed by two New Mexico physicians, John and Louisa Aiken—petitioned the Justice Department and the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs for an exemption to the laws and regulations barring the use of peyote. After several summary denials of the petition, the Department finally granted a hearing in Washington during which expert testimony was given on both sides. The Department denied the petition, chiefly on the strange ground that although the Native American Church was entitled to use peyote because it regarded peyote as God, the Church of the Awakening should be forbidden to use it because it considered peyote to be merely a sacrament that led members to God. On this basis the court concluded that the Church of the Awakening was not a religion. The ruling was upheld when it was appealed and heard by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (1971).

There have been many cases where illegal acts have been performed by those ingesting LSD or similar drugs with religious intent. In at least two cases known to this author, individuals have appeared before law officers and openly ingested LSD, declaring their religious intentions. They then fought their convictions in court, but unsuccessfully. It was similar behavior that finally brought legal support to the Native American Church for its use of peyote.

There have also been several cases of religious and quasi-religious bodies whose members have been arrested for the use of drugs similar to LSD. It is a pertinent reflection that the Christian Church would never have become established had it not been for the usually secret and illegal defiance of the cult of the Roman Emperor. The history of religion all over the globe abounds in stories of martyrs and potential martyrs whose consciences directed them to break the law because they felt that they owed primacy to their own particular form of worship and belief. It is evidence of this kind that has led the world's democracies to give all religions that are not patently antisocial the right to the free exercise of their religious faith.

Members of such religious bodies as the Church of the Awakening feel that it is an offense to their religious and ethical sensitivities to be denied the right to seek and worship God through the use of psychedelic drugs. This clearly is based on an ethical law that is higher than that acknowledged by the ordinary citizen as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Yet laws enforced by police and the courts result in the arrest, jailing and fining of those whose consciences tell them to worship God

through the ceremonially controlled use of psychedelic drugs.

In discussing the ethical issues related to the use of LSD and similar drugs, it has been pointed out that responsible investigation and experimentation has shown that in the proper hands and under appropriate circumstances these drugs are not dangerous to those who ingest them. Therefore, such drugs may be ingested and admin-

istered when other ethical obligations and legal conditions have been met. Furthermore, it has been argued that because of their religious agency, the use of such drugs with sincere religious intent carries a higher religious sanction, confirmed by respected religious bodies both in the past and modern times. In such cases, ethics allow and even enjoin the religious use of these drugs, even when their use is interdicted by the law.

REFERENCES

- Allen, G.W. 1967. *William James*. New York: Viking.
- American Psychological Association. 1979. *Ethical Standards of Psychologists*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Clark, W.H. 1978. Review of Wasson, R.G.; Ruck, C.A.P. & Hofmann, A. *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. In: *Association of Humanist Psychology Newsletter* December: 16-17.
- Clark, W.H. 1969. *Chemical Ecstasy*. Mission, Kansas: Sheed & Ward.
- Clark, W.H. & Funkhouser, G.R. 1970. Physicians and researchers disagree on psychedelic drugs. *Psychology Today* Vol. 3(11): 48-50, 70-73.
- Clark, W.H.; Lieff, J.; Lieff, C. & Sussman, R. 1975. Psychedelic research: Obstacles and values. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* Vol. 15(3): 5-17.
- Cohen, M.M.; Marinello, M.J. & Back, M. 1967. Chromosomal damage in human leukocytes induced by lysergic acid diethylamide. *Science* Vol. 155: 1417-1419.
- Cohen, S. 1960. Lysergic acid diethylamide: Side effects and complications. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* Vol. 130: 30-40.
- Dishotsky, N.I.; Loughman, W.D.; Mogar, R.E. & Lipscomb, W.R. 1971. LSD and genetic damage. *Science* Vol. 172: 431-440.
- Grinspoon, L. & Bakalar, J.B. 1979. *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered*. New York: Basic Books.
- Grof, S. 1976. *Realms of the Unconscious: Observations From LSD Research*. New York: Viking.
- Grof, S. & Halifax, J. 1977. *The Human Encounter With Death*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- James, W. 1902. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Longmans Green.
- Kast, E.C. & Collins, V.J. 1964. Lysergic acid diethylamide as an analgesic agent. *Anesthesia and Analgesia* Vol. 43: 285-291.
- La Barre, W. 1975. *The Peyote Cult*. 4th ed. New York: Schocken.
- Leary, T. & Clark, W.H. 1963. Religious implications of consciousness expanding drugs. *Religious Education* Vol. 58: 251-256.
- Long, S.Y. 1972. Does LSD induce chromosomal damage and malformation? A review of the literature. *Teratology* Vol. 6: 75-90.
- Richards, W.A. & Berendes, M. 1977-78. Lysergic acid psychotherapy and dynamics of creativity: A case report. *Journal of Altered States of Consciousness* Vol. 3: 131-148.
- Roquet, P.S.; Favreau, P.L.; Ocana, R. & de Velasco, M.R. 1975. *Lo Existencial a Través de Psicodislépticos: Una Nueva Psicoterapia*. Mexico City: Instituto de Psicosintesis.
- Stace, W.T. 1960. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.
- U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. 1971. Judgment No. 71-1157. San Francisco.
- Wasson, R.G.; Ruck, C.A.P. & Hofmann, A. 1978. *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.