

# **The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts**

## **Episode 11: Drugs and the Meaning of Life**

### **Show notes and links at [tim.blog/podcast](http://tim.blog/podcast)**

Tim Ferriss: This is Tim Ferriss. Welcome to another episode of The Tim Ferriss Show. This is an in between-isode. Yet another short audio essay to give you some philosophical tidbits, something to chew on, perhaps some tactics, some deep thinking for the weekend or the week ahead. This will probably run ten to 20 minutes in length and it is a unique in between-isode because it is a guest post. I have not seen this done before in podcasts. I am sure it has been done, but this is going to be an essay by my friend, Sam Harris. Sam is a PhD in neuroscience out of UCLA. He is also a bestselling author of many *New York Times* bestselling books, including *The End of Faith*, shorter books like *Lying* and the forthcoming *Waking Up* which I am very much looking forward to. This essay is *Drugs and the Meaning of Life*.

It is an updated essay of his and it touches on some very important topics. There are some pragmatic and practical implications, but it will take you places that might make you uncomfortable.

But, for me, it is critical listening. You can find him at [samharris.org](http://samharris.org) and I hope you enjoy. Thanks.

Sam Harris: *Drugs and the Meaning of Life*. Everything we do is for the purpose of altering consciousness. We form friendships so that we can feel certain emotions like love and avoid others like loneliness. We eat specific foods to enjoy their fleeting presence on our tongues. We read for the pleasure of thinking another person's thoughts. Every waking moment and even in our dreams, we struggle to direct the flow of sensation, motion, and cognition towards states of consciousness that we value.

Drugs are another means towards this end. Some are illegal. Some are stigmatized. Some are dangerous. Though, perversely these sets only partially intersect. Some drugs have extraordinary power and utility, such as psilocybin, the active compound in magic mushrooms, and lysergic acid diethylamide, LSD, pose no apparent risk of addiction and are physically well tolerated and yet one can still be sent to prison for their use.

Whereas drugs such as tobacco and alcohol, which have ruined countless lives, are enjoyed ad libitum in almost every society on earth. There are other points on this continuum. MDMA or ecstasy has remarkable therapeutic potential, but is also susceptible to abuse and some evidence suggests that it can be neurotoxic.

One of the great responsibilities we have is to educate ourselves, along with the next generation, about which substances are worth ingesting and for what purpose and which are not. The problem however is that we refer to all biologically active compounds by a single term, drugs, making it nearly impossible to have an intelligent discussion about the psychological, medical, ethical, and legal issues surrounding their use. The poverty of our language has been only slightly eased by the introduction of the term psychedelics to differentiate certain visionary compounds, which can produce extraordinary insights, from narcotics and other classic agents of stupefaction and abuse.

However, we should not be too quick to feel nostalgia for the counter culture of the 1960's. Yes, crucial breakthroughs were made socially and psychologically and drugs were central to the process. But, one need only read accounts of the time, such as Joan Didion slouching towards Bethlehem, to see the problem with a society bent upon rapture at any cost. For every insight of lasting value produced by drugs, there was an army of zombies with flowers in their hair shuffling toward failure and regret.

Turning on, tuning in, and dropping out is wise or even benign only if you can then drop into a mode of life that makes ethical and material sense and doesn't leave your children wondering in traffic. Drug abuse and addiction are real problems, of course. The remedy for which is education and medical treatment, not incarceration.

In fact, the most abused drugs in the United States now appear to be oxycodone and other prescription pain killers. Should these medications be made illegal? Of course not, but people need to be informed about their hazards and addicts need treatment. And all drugs, including alcohol, cigarettes, and aspirin, must be kept out of the hands of children.

I discuss issues of drug policy in some detail in my first book, *The End of Faith*, and my thinking on the subject has not changed. The war on drugs has been lost and should never have been waged. I can think of no right more fundamental than the right to peacefully steward the contents of one's own consciousness. The fact that we

pointlessly ruin the lives of nonviolent drug users by incarcerating them at enormous expense, constitutes one of the great moral failures of our time and the fact that we make room for them in our prisons by paroling murders, rapists, and child molesters, makes one wonder whether civilization is not simply doomed.

I have two daughters who will one day take drugs. Of course, I will do everything in my power to see that they choose their drugs wisely. But, a life lived entirely without drugs is neither foreseeable nor I think desirable. I hope they someday enjoy morning cup of tea or coffee as much as I do. If they drink alcohol as adults, as they probably will, I will encourage them to do it safely. If they choose to smoke marijuana, I will urge moderation.

Tabaco should be shunned and I will do everything within the bounds of decent parenting to steer them away from it. Needless to say, if I knew that either of my daughters would eventually develop a fondness for methamphetamine or crack cocaine, I might never sleep again. But, if they do not try a psychedelic like psilocybin or LSD at least once in their adult lives, I will wonder whether they had missed one of the most important rites of passage a human being can experience.

This is not to say that everyone should take psychedelics. As I will make clear in a moment, these drugs pose certain dangers. Undoubtedly, some people cannot afford to give the anchor of sanity even a slightest tug. It has been many years since I took psychedelics myself and my abstinence is born of a healthy respect for the risks involved. However, there was a period in my early 20's when I found psilocybin and LSD to be indispensable tools and some of the most important hours of my life were spent under their influence. Without them, I might never have discovered there was inner landscape of mind worth exploring.

There is no getting around the role of luck here. If you are lucky and you take the right drug, you will know what it is to be enlightened or to be close enough to persuade you that enlightenment is possible. If you are unlucky, you will know what it is to be clinically insane. While I do not recommend the latter experience, it does increase one's respect for the tenuous condition of sanity, as well as one's compassion for people who suffer from mental illness.

Human beings have ingested plant based psychedelics for millennia, but scientific research on these compounds did not begin until the 1950's. By 1965 a thousand studies had been published primarily

on psilocybin and LSD. Many of which attested to the usefulness of psychedelics in treatment of clinical depression. Obsessive compulsive disorder, alcohol addiction, and the pain and anxiety associated with terminal cancer. Within a few years however, this entire field of research was abolished in an effort to stem the spread of these drugs among the public. After a hiatus that lasted an entire generation, scientific research on the pharmacology and therapeutic value of psychedelics has quietly resumed.

Psychedelics such as psilocybin, LSD, DMT, and mescaline all powerfully alter cognition, perception, and mood. Most seem to exert their influence through the serotonin system in the brain, primarily by binding to 5HT2A receptors. Though several have an affinity for other receptors as well leading to an increased activity in the prefrontal cortex. Although the prefrontal cortex in turn modulates sub cortical dopamine production and certain of these compounds, such as LSD, bind directly to dopamine receptors, the effect of psychedelics seems to take place largely outside of dopamine pathways. Which could explain why these drugs are not habit forming.

The efficacy of psychedelics seem to establish the material basis of mental and spiritual life beyond any doubt. For the introduction of these substances into the brain is the obvious cause of any numerous apocalypse that follows. It is possible, however, if not actually plausible to see as this evidence from the other end and argue as Aldous Huxley did in his classic, *The Doors of Perception* that the primary function of the brain may be eliminative. Its purpose may be to prevent a transpersonal dimension of mind from flooding consciousness, thereby allowing apes like ourselves to make their way in the world without being dazzled at every step by visionary phenomena that are irrelevant to their psychical survival.

Huxley thought of the brain as a kind of reducing valve for mind at large. In fact, the idea that the brain is a filter, rather than the origin of mind goes back at least as far as [inaudible] [00:08:19] and William James. In Huxley's view, this would explain the efficacy of psychedelics. They may simply be a material means of opening the tap. Huxley was operating under the assumption that psychedelics decrease brain activity. Some recent data have lent support to this view.

For instance, a neuroimaging study of psilocybin suggests that the drug primarily reduces activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, a region involved in a wide variety of tasks related to self-monitoring. However, other studies have found that psychedelic

increase activity throughout the brain. Whatever the case, the action of these drugs does not rule out dualism or the existence of realms of mind beyond the brain.

But, then nothing does. That is one of the problems with views of this kind. They appear to be infallible. We have reason to be skeptical of the brain as barrier thesis. If the brain were merely a filter on the mind, damaging it should increase cognition. In fact, strategically damaging the brain should be the most reliable method of spiritual practice available to anyone. In almost every case, loss of brain should yield more mind, but that is not how the mind works.

Some people try to get around this by suggesting that the brain may function more like a radio. A receiver of conscious states, rather than a barrier to them. At first glance, this would appear to account for the deleterious effects of neurological injury and disease. For if one smashes a radio with a hammer, it will no longer function properly. There is a problem with this metaphor however, those who employ it invariably forget that we are the music, not the radio. If the brain were nothing more than a receiver of conscious states, it should be impossible to diminish a person's experience of the cosmos by damaging her brain.

She might seem unconscious from the outside, like a broken radio, but subjectively speaking, the music would play on. Specific reductions in brain activity might benefit people in certain ways, unmasking memories or abilities that are being activity inhibited by the regions in question. But, there is no reason to think that the destruction of the central nervous system would leave the mind unaffected, much less improved.

Medications that reduce anxiety, generally work by increasing the effect of the inhibitory neurotransmitter gaba, thereby diminishing their own activity in various parts of the brain. But, the fact that dampening arousal in this way can make people feel better, does not suggest that they would feel better still if they were drugged into a coma. Similarly, it would be unsurprising if psilocybin reduced brain activity in areas responsible for self-monitoring because that might in part account for the experiences that are often associated with this drug.

This does not give us any reason to believe that turning of the brain entirely would yield an increased awareness of sprigtail reality. However, the brain does exclude an extraordinary amount of information from consciousness.

And like many people who have taken psychedelics, I can attest that these compounds through open the gates. Pausing the existence of mind at large is more tempting in some states of consciousness than in others. But these drugs can also produce mental states that are best viewed as forms of psychosis. As a general matter, I believe that we should be very slow to draw conclusions about the nature of the cosmos on the basis of inner experiences, no matter how profound they may seem.

One thing is certain, the mind is vaster and more fluid than our ordinary waking consciousness suggests. And it is simply impossible to communicate the profundity or seeming profundity of psychedelic states to those who have never experienced them. Indeed, it is even difficult to remind oneself of the power of these states once they have passed.

Many people wonder about the difference between meditation and other contemplative practices and psychedelics. Are these drugs a form of cheating? Or are they the only means of authentic awakening? They are neither. All psychoactive drugs modulate the existing neurochemistry of the brain, either by mimicking specific neurotransmitters or by causing neurotransmitters themselves to be more or less active.

Everything that one can experience on a drug is at some level an expression of the brain's potential, hence what everyone has seen or felt after ingesting LSD is likely to have been seen or felt by someone, somewhere without it. However, it cannot be denied that psychedelics are uniquely potent means of altering consciousness. Teach a person to meditate, pray, chant, or do yoga and there is no guarantee that anything will happen. Depending on his aptitude or interest, the only reward for his efforts may be boredom and a sore back.

If, however, a person ingests 100 micrograms of LSD, what happens next will depend on a variety of factors. But, there is no question that something will happen and boredom is simply not in the cards. Within the hour the significance of his existence will bear down upon him like an avalanche. As the late Terrence McKenna never tired of pointing out, this guarantee of profound effect for better or worse is what separates psychedelics from every other method of spiritual inquiry.

Ingesting a powerful dose of a psychedelic drug is like strapping oneself to a rocket without a guidance system. One might wind up

somewhere worth growing and depending on the compound of one's setting, some trajectories are more likely than others. But, however methodically one prepares for the voyage, one can still be hurled into states of mind so painful and confusing as to be indistinguishable from psychosis. Hence the terms psychotomimetic and psychotogenic that are occasionally applied to these drugs.

I have visited both extremes on the psychedelic continuum. The positive experiences were more sublime than I could have ever imagined or that I can now faithfully recall. These chemicals disclose layers of beauty that are as powerless to capture and for which the beauty of nature itself is a mere simulacrum. It is one thing to be awe struck by the sight of a giant redwood and amazed at the details of its history and underline biology. It is quite another to spend an apparent eternity in **[inaudible] [00:13:55]** commune with it.

Positive psychedelic experiences often reveal how wondrously at ease in the universe a human can be. And for most of us, normal waking consciousness does not offer so much as a glimmer of these deeper possibilities. People generally come away from such experiences with a sense that conventional states of consciousness obscure and truncate sacred insights and emotions. If the patriarchs and matriarchs of the world's religions experienced such states of mind, many of their claims about the nature of reality would make subjective sense.

A beatific vision does not tell you anything about the birth of the cosmos, but it does reveal how utterly transfigured a mind can be by a full collision with the present moment. However, as the peaks are high, the valleys are deep. My bad trips were without question the most harrowing hours I have ever endured and they make the notion of hell as a metaphor if not an actual destination, see perfectly apt. If nothing else, these excruciating experiences can become a source of compassion.

I think it may be impossible to imagine what it is like to suffer from mental illness without having briefly touched its shores. At both ends of the continuum time dilates in ways that cannot be described. Apart from merely observing that these experiences can seem eternal. I have spent hours, both good and bad, in which any understanding that I had ingested a drug was lost and all memories of my past along with it.

Emersion in the present moment to this degree is synonymous with the feeling that one has always been and will always be in precisely this condition. Depending on the character of one's experience at that point, notions of salvation or damnation may well apply. Blake's like about beholding eternity in an hour, neither promises nor threatens too much. In the beginning, my experiences with psilocybin and LSD were so positive that I did not see how a bad trip could be possible. Notions of said and setting, admittedly vague, seem sufficient to account for my good luck.

My mental state was exactly as it needed to be. I was a spiritually serious investigator of my own mind and my setting was generally one of natural beauty or secure solitude.

I cannot account for why my adventures with psychedelics were uniformly pleasant until they were not. But, once the doors to hell opened, they appeared to be left permanently ajar. Thereafter, whether or not a trip was good in the aggregate, it generally entailed some excruciating detour on the path to sublimity. Have you ever traveled beyond all mere metaphors to the mountain of shame and stayed for 1,000 years? I do not recommend it.

On my first trip to Nepal I took a row boat out on Phewa Lake in Pokhara, which offers a stunning view of the Annapurna Range. It was early morning and I was alone. As the sun rose over the water, I ingested 400 micrograms of LSD. I was 20 years old and had taken the drug at least ten times previously. What could go wrong? Everything as it turns out. Well, not everything. I did not drown.

I have a vague memory of driving ashore and being surrounded by a group of Nepali soldiers. After watching me for a while as I ogled them over the gunnel like a lunatic, they seemed on the verge of deciding what to do with me. Some polite words of Esperanto and a few mad oar strokes and I was offshore into oblivion.

I suppose that could have ended differently. But, soon there was no lake or mountains or boat, and if I had fallen into the water I am pretty sure there would have been no one to swim. For the next several hours my mind became a perfect instrument of self-torture. All that remained was a continuous shattering and terror for which I have no words.

An encounter like that takes something out of you. Even if LSD and similar drugs are biologically safe, they have the potential to



produce extremely unpleasant and destabilizing experiences. I believe I was positively affected by my good trips and negatively affected by the bad ones for weeks and months.

Meditation can open the mind to a similar range of conscious states, but far less haphazardly. If LSD is like being strapped to a rocket, learning to meditate is like gently raising a sail. Yes, it is possible even with guidance to wind up someplace terrifying and some people probably should not spend long periods in intensive practice, but the general effect of meditation training is of settling ever more fully into one's own skin and suffering less there.

As I discussed in *The End of Faith* I viewed most psychedelic experiences as potentially misleading. Psychedelics do not guarantee wisdom or a clear recognition of the selfless nature of consciousness. They merely guarantee that the content of consciousness will change. Such visionary experiences appear to me to be ethically neutral. Therefore, it seems that psychedelic ecstasies but be steered toward our personal and collective wellbeing by some other principled.

As Daniel Pinchbeck pointed out in his highly entertaining book, *breaking open the Head*, the fact that both the Mayans and the Aztecs used psychedelics while being enthusiastic practitioners of human sacrifice, makes any idealistic connection between plant based shamanism and an enlightened society seem terribly naïve. As I discussed elsewhere in my work, the form of transcendence that appears to link directly to ethical behavior in human wellbeing is that which occurs in the midst of ordinary waking life. It is by ceasing to cling to the contents of consciousness to our thoughts, moods, and desires, that we make progress.

This project does not in principle require that we experience more content. The freedom from self is both the goal and foundation of spiritual life is coincident with normal perception and cognition. Though admittedly, this can be difficult to realize. The power of psychedelics however, is that they often reveal in a span of a few hours' depths of awe and understanding that can otherwise elude us for a lifetime.

William James said it about as well as anyone. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational condenses as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness. While stall about it, parted by the filmiest of screens, their live potential forms of consciousness entirely

different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the request stimulus and add a touch there and all their completeness definite types of mentality, which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation.

No account of the universe in its totality can be final, which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question.

For they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness, yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. I believe that psychedelics may be indispensable for some people, especially those who like me initially need convincing that profound changes in consciousness are possible. After that it seems wise to find ways of practicing that do not present the same risks. Happily, such methods are widely available.