Contradictory Impulses in the Psychedelic Sixties

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Responding to academic efforts to create a static typology to describe the psychedelic counterculture of the American 1960s, this paper emphasizes the contradictory impulses of the time. Through an investigation of varied 1960s experimentation with chemically induced mysticism, social activism, and innovative technology, we can gain a sense of the tensions within sixties counterculture and a better understanding of the passions that fueled it. It will be argued that one underlying and unifying theme is a consequentialist ethic willing to transgress every boundary in the pursuit of good vibes. The results, of course, were mixed.

Introduction

Seeking to understand any aspect of the 1960s counterculture presents a historiographical difficulty stemming from our lack of critical distance. In one sense the counterculture movement is a measurable event with clear enough chronological parameters to allow The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy to define the term as ‘a protest movement by American youth that arose in the late 1960s and faded during the late 1970s’.1 The Historical Dictionary of the 1960s asserts that the broader American awareness of the counterculture participants themselves, the ‘hippies’, can be traced to a 1965 news article written on ‘a new group of young people who gathered in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco and championed the virtues of peace, free love, recreational drug use, rock and roll, and absolute individual freedom to do your own thing’.2 While these chronological and initial geographic boundaries can be defined, it is also true that the memory and spirit of the sixties counterculture endures as an important influence in the broader American culture.3 The sixties counterculture is still alive, it is living history, and as a scholarly concern this is what makes it simultaneously challenging and vitally important. It is good practice, therefore, to press against the boundaries of any schema that packages sixties counterculture too neatly.

Steven Tipton’s Getting Saved from the Sixties remains an important resource for understanding how the sixties counterculture movement fits into the broader history of moral and religious life in the United States.4 Working in a tradition of writing sociology informed by deep reflection on the full range of relevant intellectual history, it is not surprising that Tipton’s perspective on the sixties

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3 While Haight-Ashbury served as an epicenter for 1960s counterculture, the geographic dispersion of the movement created concentrations in all major American cities, and in London.
remains engaging and provocative thirty years after its publication in 1982. Leading
to a National Endowment for the Humanities funded study on ‘The Moral Basis of
Social Commitment in America’, Getting Saved from the Sixties, was the genesis of a
significant sociological effort to better understand American values and the
American character at the end of the twentieth century. Tipton’s influential
categories and conclusions regarding the moral vision of the sixties are essential
reading and a valuable foundation for any study of the subject.

In the first chapter of Getting Saved from the Sixties, Steven Tipton refers to the
alternative attitudes of the sixties counterculture as ‘four related pairs’ that place the
cultural conflict of the era within a social context: (1) ecstatic experience versus
technical reason; (2) holism versus analytic discrimination; (3) acceptance versus
problem-solving activism; (4) intuitive certainty versus pluralistic relativism. As a
heuristic device his model can be helpful, but the binaries can break down when one
considers the breadth of the counterculture lifestyle on its own terms. Through the
analysis of one dimension of the sixties counterculture, the use of psychedelic drugs
for religious or mystical purposes, this paper will demonstrate that Tipton’s
categorical model obscures important contradictory impulses in the sixties. Instead of
acceptance alone, the counterculture community employed problem-solving activism
when addressing the dangers of drug use at the local level. Instead of ecstatic
experience for its own sake, LSD became part of a transformative religious
philosophy characterized by a desire for social change on the global scale and a
burgeoning optimism concerning technical expertise.

The Origin and Spread of LSD

The term ‘psychedelic’ is used to refer to the broad class of drugs most closely
associated with religion and mysticism in the sixties. Other possibilities abound:
‘hallucinogenic’, ‘enteheogenic’, or ‘phanerothymic’ but psychedelic seems to be the
most common usage. The Greek roots of the word accord with the mystical
dimension of the psychedelic experience, as well; psyche (ψυχή) meaning ‘spirit’ or
‘soul’ and deloun (δηλοῦν) meaning ‘to reveal’ or ‘to make manifest.’ I have chosen
to focus primarily on lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and psilocybin (mushrooms)
due to their prominence in the psychedelic scene of the sixties counterculture. Walter
Houston Clark opens Chemical Ecstasy by stating that he attended seminars with Dr.
Timothy Leary and observed or helped guide ‘some 175 administrations of
psilocybin and LSD’.

LSD was discovered during research on synthetic derivatives of ergot by the
debunks the myth that the creation of LSD was an accident. LSD, more properly
LSD-25, was the twenty-fifth result in a series of lysergic acid derivatives created
through painstaking laboratory work aimed at producing chemicals for practical

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6 Tipton, Getting Saved From the Sixties, p. 21.
7 Grateful Dead supporter and counterculture legend Stanley ‘Bear’ Owsley recently described himself
as being ‘still comfortable with the term’, in S. Owsley, ‘On Psychedelics’,
ends. The discovery of the psychological impact of LSD-25 was, however, the result of an accidental dosage that may have been absorbed through the doctor’s fingertip. Subsequent events are recorded in the report Hofmann sent to his employer:

Last Friday, April 16, 1943, I was forced to interrupt my work in the laboratory in the middle of the afternoon and proceed home, being affected by a remarkable restlessness, combined with a slight dizziness. At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant intoxicated-like condition, characterised by an extremely stimulated imagination. In a dreamlike state, with eyes closed (I found the daylight to be unpleasantly glaring), I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors. After some two hours this condition faded away.⁹

Five days later, after he figured out what must have happened, Hofmann tried a self-experiment with a .25mg dose that induced what he described in his laboratory notes as a ‘most severe crisis’. Hofmann’s next-door neighbor appeared as a ‘malevolent, insidious witch with a colored mask’, and he became aware of a worse horror that he describes in what could be mystical terms as the ‘disintegration of the outer world and the dissolution of my ego’. After his doctor arrived and put him to bed, the worst of the episode passed and Hofmann reports ‘a feeling of good fortune and gratitude’ that allowed him to close his eyes and enjoy the ‘unprecedented colors and plays of shapes’. Hofmann’s superiors were so skeptical of this report that they had to try the chemical themselves but by the sixties the details of his experience would seem a commonplace occurrence.¹⁰

Hofmann’s description of his initial experiences with LSD provides a fair overview of the kinds of effects the drug produces with the exception that he does not directly mention any manifestation of synesthesia. He experienced the horrors of a ‘bad trip’ at one point and the elation of a good trip at another. He had hallucinations of colours and shapes and experienced a philosophical or mystical sense of reality bending as the outside world seemed to disintegrate. This comes across as an almost clinical description compared to Timothy Leary’s strident proselytising for LSD in a 1966 interview with Playboy magazine. When asked what using the drug had done for him Leary replied,

I was thirty-nine when I had my first psychedelic experience. At that time, I was a middle-aged man involved in the middle-aged process of dying. My joy in life, my sensual openness, my creativity were all sliding downhill. Since that time, six years ago, my life has been renewed in almost every dimension.¹¹

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¹⁰ Hofmann, LSD, pp. 13–18.

He goes on in the same interview to describe how the drug can enhance all sensory experiences, induce hundreds of orgasms, and cure homosexuality.\textsuperscript{12} More compelling for the religion scholar, and for Leary himself it would seem, was the power of LSD to help one ‘discover divinity’.\textsuperscript{13} Describing his work to Playboy, he said, ‘I consider my work basically religious, because it has as its goal the systematic expansion of consciousness and the discovery of energies within, which men call “divine”).\textsuperscript{14} This expansion of consciousness easily outweighs any risks associated with the drug for Leary and he spends the rest of the interview brushing off questions about LSD-induced psychosis and bad trips as rarities advertised through government supported scare tactics.

This does not mean that the participants in the counterculture movement were unaware of the darker side of LSD. In a piece for the Berkeley Barb, a popular underground newspaper, Allan Coult criticises Leary for holding an overly optimistic view of the LSD experience. He writes,

Leary’s problem is that aware as he claims to be of the dance of life and the reality and validity of both good and bad, he wants the good without the bad, as do a lot of heads. Everyone’s looking for a good trip and nobody wants a bad trip. Some bombed out fellow is always asking how come he doesn’t have any good trips. No one ever asks how come he doesn’t have any bad trips.

The undercurrent of the Coult piece is that anything that brings a person into contact with reality is going to necessarily reveal unpleasantness. But there is no room in his critique for the transcendent possibilities of LSD, for the chance that it may allow a person to better herself. The mixture of good and bad trips defies those who would present LSD as a life renewing experience. He goads Leary, ‘Yes, Timothy, there is no Santa Claus. Take a trip and you’re as likely to come out the dragon as Saint George’.\textsuperscript{15} In the same issue of the Barb, Sheil Salasnek comes to Leary’s defence by arguing that Leary himself acknowledges the need for a trusted guide when undergoing an LSD experience. He agrees with Coult that bad trips do happen and that they can induce acute terror:

This is the part of LSD that sends people to emergency rooms sobbing uncontrollably and muttering that they are insane. This is the part that has caused the one or two recorded suicides. In Coult’s view, to deny that this part exists is to bury your head in the ground, but to assume that the only way to cope with it is a hospital setting and an available bottle of Thorazine is equally ridiculous. A trusted and competent

\textsuperscript{12} The American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973. Leary’s casual comment on the issue is jarring to the contemporary reader.

\textsuperscript{13} Leary, ‘She Comes in Colors’, p. 135.

\textsuperscript{14} Allan Coult, Editorial for Berkeley BARB, vol. 3, no. 14, 7 October 1966. The Berkeley Barb was an independently operated underground newspaper distributed in the San Francisco area from 1965 to 1980.

\textsuperscript{15} Coult, Editorial for Berkeley BARB.
“guide” can do far more than an uncomprehending doctor and his powerful phenothiazenes.\textsuperscript{16}

Salasnek’s emphasis on the role of ‘guides’ reinforces the communal and potentially problem-solving characteristics of the LSD counterculture.

**Problem-Solving Activism in the LSD Community**

The danger of the bad trip was enough to initiate the creation of a community-based response team in the Bay Area. An article about LSD Rescue advertises, ‘psychedelic adventurers in San Francisco who are on a bad trip can call in a friendly pilot to help bring them down’.\textsuperscript{17} With a call to LSD Rescue you could get an experienced guide to come to your home, sit with you, and help to talk you out of whatever nightmarish reality you had fallen into. In the most severe cases, LSD Rescue would help a victim to a local ‘sympathetic’ hospital where doctors would apply a sedative and hopefully decline to call the police. Demand for this service was evidently huge with the ‘Director of Field Services’ reporting 400 calls a week shortly after the service had gone live in the winter of 1966.\textsuperscript{18} Demand eventually outstripped the availability of the service and its organisers issued a plea for volunteers in June of 1967 that ended with a suspension of their phone line for a couple of months.\textsuperscript{19} By August of that year, however, they were live again with the Berkeley Barb issuing this helpful advice: ‘For a fast downer, bum trippers can call 620-6190’.\textsuperscript{20}

A similar principle can be found in Timothy Leary’s *A Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In part, this manual is a blend of eastern religion and philosophising on LSD, aimed at providing users with the right mindset for more spiritually satisfying trips. There is a details-oriented dimension to the manual as well, however, and its third section contains some ‘technical comments’ with instructions on dosages, appropriate settings, and the need for experienced companions in the form of a ‘fellow voyager’ or ‘trusted observer’.\textsuperscript{21} Leary’s manual advises using LSD in a setting free of ‘one’s usual social and interpersonal games’ with at least three days of time set aside for the psychedelic experience itself and a subsequent period of reflection. He also advises taking measures to avoid interruptions by visitors or phone calls, ‘trust in the surroundings and privacy are necessary’.\textsuperscript{22} To avoid fear, the LSD user needs to be confident about the environment and ‘the essential thing is to feel as comfortable as possible in the surroundings, whether in one’s living room or under the night sky’.\textsuperscript{23} Music and religious objects can be introduced, depending on the kind of hallucinatory

\textsuperscript{17} ‘LSD Rescue Ready to Ride Along’, *Berkeley BARB*, vol. 5, no. 1, 7-13 July 1967.
\textsuperscript{18} ‘LSD Rescue Ready to Ride Along’.
\textsuperscript{19} ‘Help LSD Rescue Service’, *Berkeley BARB*, vol. 5, no. 1, 7-13 July 1967.
\textsuperscript{20} ‘LSD Rescue Restored’, *Berkeley BARB*, vol. 5, no. 5, 4-10 August 1967.
\textsuperscript{22} Leary, *The Psychedelic Experience*, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{23} Leary, *The Psychedelic Experience*, p. 106.
experience that a person is looking for. If the trip is communal, and Leary does seem to prefer that possibility, then the setting should be agreed upon by the group.

In addition to a safe setting, Leary places great importance on the role and power of the ‘psychedelic guide’ who can ‘move consciousness with the slightest gesture or action’. Such a guide must have a distinct mixture of personal experience with psychedelics and calming personality traits that remain manifest even during periods of ‘swirling mindlessness’. The guide must be free of personal motives and establish a bond of ‘security and confidence’ that can overcome the sort of fear that leads to the bad trip. Leary views this role, one he often took upon himself, as particularly heroic. He writes,

> The role of the psychedelic guide is perhaps the most exciting and inspiring role in society. He is literally a liberator, one who provides illumination, one who frees men from their life-long internal bondage.

Leary is certain of the practical and spiritual importance of the psychedelic guide.

Examining these prescriptions on setting and guide reveals the use of LSD to be a sort of mystery religion. The path to transcendence is governed by a series of strongly advised rules and it must be pursued through some communal experience, even if it is just the experience of hearing about and then buying the acid. Leary sets out a clear hierarchy with a special class of psychedelic guides who are best able through both experience and character to initiate new practitioners into the world of LSD. Without even considering interpretive moves regarding the hallucinatory experience of LSD, there is a significant body of knowledge that Leary believes a person should be familiar with before their first trip. On a similar model, aspiring converts to the Roman Catholic Church become a part of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. The catechumenates and candidates leave the Catholic mass prior to the Eucharist for education about the teachings and spirituality of Roman Catholicism at the hands of experienced guides. The stance of the Church going back to Pseudo-Dionysius and beyond is that a person must be properly prepared before engaging with the great sacramental mysteries. It is important to note that similarity within the sixties counterculture was not the result of ironic or religiously hopeful mimicry on the part of the psychedelic community. Instead, the possibility of the bad trip and the impulse to share knowledge built up in response created an atmosphere in which an initiation process was a necessity.

The emphasis on safe settings and bad trips reveals that the potentially horrifying effects of LSD were known and publicised in the sixties counterculture. Albert Hofmann’s first doses of the drug elicited frightening hallucinations and the millions of hits that spread throughout the United States in subsequent years all carried that possibility. These experiences were waved away as the result of bad planning by Leary, used to ground the LSD trip as a brutal encounter with reality by Coult, and seen as prescriptive for a safe setting prior to drug use by Salasnek but all

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three knew bad trips were possible. If a debate on the matter made it into the pages of Berkeley’s premier counterculture newspaper, then it is safe to assume that similar debates occurred wherever LSD changed hands. If the San Francisco LSD Rescue service received so many weekly calls that they had to beg for more volunteers and shut down for the summer of ‘67, then it is quite likely that would-be LSD users personally encountered others who could testify to a bad trip experience. Beyond recklessness or curiosity about a new experience, then, why would anyone risk using psychedelic drugs and then defend them so strongly against their detractors?

**LSD, Religious Experience, and Social Change**

In 1967, Walter Clark and Milton Raskin conducted a study on the religious factors of LSD usage and presented the results in a paper to the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion entitled ‘LSD as a Means of Exploring the Nonrational Components of the Religious Consciousness’. Two years later, Clark described the results of the study again as part of a book entitled *Chemical Ecstasies: Psychedelic Drugs and Religion*. The study involved administering varying dosages of LSD to eight volunteers over the course of sixteen days at a hospital in Norwich, Connecticut and, for Clark’s part, conducting interviews to see if the drugs caused a religious response. According to Clark, the eight subjects all held liberal or even radical views about religion and included two theological students and two atheists. He writes,

> Though very resistant to the use of the term “God” in their reports … both atheists gave unmistakable evidence of intense religious natures by reporting experiences of “rebirth”, “unity”, “blessedness and peace”, and “the Holy and the Divine”. On Clark’s interpretation, this evidence suggests that the fruits of drug-induced religion parallel what are considered the more normal variety.

He also holds, in keeping with a line of argument advanced by many proponents of LSD in the 1960s, that the consensus of the volunteers was that the LSD experience had ‘profound personal significance’. ‘Five of the eight reported’, according to Clark, that it was ‘beyond anything ever experienced or imagined’.

The results of Clark’s work with LSD in Norwich pair well with those of the now infamous ‘Good Friday Experiment’. On 20 April 1962, a medical doctor and Harvard religious studies student named Walter Pahnke conducted an experiment on the religious properties of psychedelics under the advisement of Timothy Leary, still a Harvard lecturer at this time, and Richard Alpert who had not yet been dismissed from his appointment as a Harvard professor. Pahnke arranged for twenty

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28 Clark, *Chemical Ecstasy*, p. 82.
29 Clark, *Chemical Ecstasy*, p. 84.
30 Clark, *Chemical Ecstasy*, p. 82.
31 This undertaking is sometimes referred to as ‘The Marsh Chapel Experiment’ or grouped into a broader category of ‘Harvard Psychedelic Tests’.
Protestant divinity student volunteers to meet in the Marsh Chapel of Boston University where half of the group would receive a dose of psilocybin and the other half would be given a vitamin placebo. The twenty students were then exposed to an audio feed of the sermons, music, and other goings on of a Christian religious service being conducted in another part of the building for two and a half hours. This was a double-blind study, meaning that neither the experimenters nor the subjects knew who had received the psilocybin, or who had received a placebo. The research team also brought in two ‘leaders’ or guides who monitored the students and stood ready to respond if anyone became frightened.

Pahnke, who claimed that he had never used psychedelic drugs, developed a typology of mystical experience to serve as a comparison point for interviews with his subjects. He explains in ‘Drugs and Mysticism’, an article that he published in the *Journal of Parapsychology* a few years after the experiment, that this typology was inspired by William James and deeply influenced by the work of W. T. Stace. Pahnke lists nine categories of mystical experience: unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, objectivity and reality, paradoxicality, alleged ineffability, transiency, and persistent positive changes in attitude and behavior. Upon interviewing the subjects both immediately after the experiment and six months later, Pahnke writes that those who ‘were given psilocybin found the religious service more meaningful, both at the time and later, than did the control subjects’.

A Saint Petersburg Times interview with Michael Young, one of the study participants and now a Unitarian minister, reveals that he has a clear memory of his experience on psilocybin after over thirty years:

Those wild and colorful seven hours showed him a new mode of perception that was nothing short of ecstatic. The drug trip helped solidify his career path in the ministry. And it conquered his fear of death.

In short, the Good Friday experiment produced the same kind of ‘profound personal significance’ results in its test group that Walter Clark recorded in his LSD study.

Psychedelic research became unfashionable by the end of the 1960s due to the increasingly negative public image of the drugs and to ethical failures on the part of the most vocal research proponents. Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert were both dismissed from Harvard by 1963. In Leary’s case the dismissal was ostensibly over his absence from campus for a semester without permission. Alpert was fired for giving psychedelic drugs to undergraduate students in violation of an agreement he had with the university. In both cases, their strong urge to proselytise on the behalf of psychedelic drugs leaves one wondering how they could have claimed any kind of scientific objectivity for their work. The stigma against psychedelic research may be on the way out, however; Johns Hopkins just conducted a study on the religious effects of psilocybin in 2006. Conveniently, the title of their study is also its thesis:

Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance. The Johns Hopkins work is an updated and more carefully controlled version of Pahnke’s Good Friday Experiment. Instead of twenty students in a chapel, the psilocybin was administered to one volunteer at a time, who would then put on a blindfold and listen to classical music while a research assistant kept an eye on them. The volunteers were then asked to fill out a questionnaire on their state of consciousness—a mysticism questionnaire based on the one Walter Pahnke designed—and another mysticism scale developed by psychologist Ralph Hood. The results of this study are strikingly similar to those of Walter Clark’s LSD research and Pahnke’s Good Friday experiment.

Subjects in the Johns Hopkins experiments who received psilocybin scored much higher on mysticism scales than the control group who had received methylphenidate (Ritalin). Thirty-three percent of the volunteers rated the experience as the most spiritually significant of their lives and another thirty-eight percent ranked it among the top five. In a follow-up study conducted fourteen months later, fifty-eight percent of the volunteers met the criteria for having had a ‘complete mystical experience’. In written comments a volunteer reported, ‘It reminded and comforted me that God is truly and unconditionally loving’. Another wrote, ‘the embodied “me” experienced ultimate transcendence’, and yet another described the experience as ‘the feeling of no boundaries’.

Maria Estevez, a subject in the study, allowed *Scientific American* to publish the following report of her psychedelic experience:

> With my eyes closed I was overwhelmed with glorious golden light, suffused with every color, prisms and rainbows everywhere like a shining hologram. The Light itself was alive, a radiant consciousness of ultimate intelligence, perfect integrity, singularity and purity. The Light pervaded everything. It composed everything.

There can be no doubt that these drugs have the ability to produce experiences of profound spiritual meaning.

This is in accord with another thread in Steven Tipton’s *Culture and Counterculture* where he argues that the sixties counterculture is characterised by a shift to a new kind of utilitarian morality. This stands in contrast, first, to a system of biblical morality marked by an authoritative structure and specific laws. This is the moral system invoked by John the Evangelist, ‘For this is the love of God, that we...’

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39 R. Griffiths et al., ‘Mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin mediate the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance 14 months later’, *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2008, p. 621.
keep his commandments, and his commandments are not grievous’. Tipton writes, ‘Biblical religion poses the moral question, “What should I do?” in the form, “What does God command?” The ensuing answer specifies the act which is “obedient” and “faithful”. As a deontological moral structure this also opens the door for a ‘rationalist line of development’, since ‘moral disagreement is resolved by reasoning dialectically’. This worldview shifted as society became more secular and human beings came to be seen as ends unto themselves.

Biblical morality, according to Tipton, gave way to utilitarian individualism in American moral culture. In such a system we have abandoned deontological thinking for an ends based approach, a consequentialist approach. The goal for the utilitarian is to maximise the amount of good consequences, which demand debate on what those consequences ought to be. Reflecting on Tipton’s model, we can see that the consequentialist approach has guided us through the greatest moments of the enlightenment, including the founding of the American republic, but that it is also at the root of our shamelessly consumerist culture. The individual utilitarian pursues a path of self-interest; this is not the path of Cincinnatus who twice held absolute power for the good of the Roman state and twice surrendered that power before returning to his farm. Rather, individual utilitarianism is the path of the corporate buyout, the power suit, the merciless pursuit of wealth and success as an end justifying all means. How then can we situate the sixties counterculture, unconcerned with both biblical laws and personal gain, into these morality cultures?

Tipton makes the intriguing suggestion that the sixties counterculture is a type of utilitarianism with a radically new perspective on what counts as good consequences. The key shift for the counterculture is in its conception of the individual. Tipton writes, ‘The spread of psychotherapeutic, pharmacological, mystical, and also literary academic modes of introspection has given a highly reflexive quality to the counterculture’s concept of the individual’. This is an individual best served by the pursuit of deep experience and self-awareness instead of the piling up of material possessions. This in turn presents a morality focused on universal love and non-injury as the chief obligations. For Tipton, these obligations are not the result of biblical injunction and are certainly not the result of utilitarian self-interest.

The ethical obligations of the sixties counterculture are connected to a monist strain, a more mystical world-view in which ‘all is one’, according to Tipton. This is an insightful observation that bears some truth. A litany used in a ‘LSD cult’ active during the late 1960s reveals monist impulses, the influence of eastern religion, and a desire to parody common wisdom sayings in western culture:

When the five senses and the mind are still,
and reason itself rests in silence,
then begins the Path supreme.
You’ll rush in where angels fear to tread.

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42 1 John 5:3.
43 Tipton, Getting Saved From the Sixties, p. 3.
44 Tipton, Getting Saved From the Sixties, p. 5.
45 Tipton, Getting Saved From the Sixties, pp. 12-14.
46 Tipton, Getting Saved From the Sixties, p. 14.
You no sooner attain the great void than
body and mind are lost together.

*Kill the drive to stay alive.*
To die is one’s duty in life,
To live without dying is death.\(^{47}\)

The aim of this litany, spoken after the participants had ingested LSD, was to centre their intentions as they journeyed toward the experience of non-being. It is quite possible that such a belief system could give rise to a monist ethic. However, I do not believe that investment in this one expression of the transcendent journey was necessary for the actions of LSD Rescue to help ‘psychedelic adventurers’, or Leary’s insistence upon the need for a guide to act as ‘spiritual liberator’.

The monist ethic is one example of counterculture morality, and another is the shared responsibility that the psychedelic community had for helping each other on their spiritual journey. Straining toward transcendence is a dangerous undertaking that requires a community dedicated to the mutual, mystical goal. The ethics of such a community have a pragmatic mould, as well. People who break the law together and occasionally lose control of their actions need a culture of mutual support. The ethics of such necessity cannot be fully connected to a monist philosophy common to many but not all expressions of counterculture mystical identity. There is a balance that must be kept in mind; yes, the counterculture had monist tendencies, but these never overpowered the emphasis on the personal freedom to ‘do your own thing’.

With some caution about monism, then, Tipton’s expression of a counterculture utilitarian principle is valid: ‘Everybody should always do the act which will produce the greatest amount of love and awareness for all living beings—the most good vibes’.\(^{48}\) He is right to emphasise in the strongest terms that the counterculture community of the sixties had a sense of morality and social virtue. This sense of virtue extends to the greater social sphere as well, however. In *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, Jay Stevens describes a counterculture ethic that pairs well with Tipton’s utilitarian principle: ‘Drop acid and change yourself, change yourself and then change the world’.\(^{49}\) The transformative dimension of psychedelic drugs is an ethical dimension. In concrete terms, Huston Smith reports that his experience with the Good Friday Experiment left such an impact that he was conscious of treating people more kindly for weeks afterward.\(^{50}\)

A useful parallel can also be drawn between psychedelic exploration and social action during the turbulent sixties. The civil rights movement and the anti-war movement in the United States gained ground in their pursuit of justice through the opposition to traditional structures of society and authority. Movements such as these sought to tear apart the social fabric of American society with faith that a better world could be knit anew. When Daniel Berrigan and company set fire to a pile of stolen draft cards in Cantonsville, they were pushing societal structures to their limit

\(^{48}\) Tipton, *Getting Saved From the Sixties*, p. 15.
just as the counterculture as a whole sought to reimagine social and mental boundaries that seemed previously impenetrable. If protest movements were out to reimagine societal possibilities, then the psychedelic culture sought to reimagine reality itself. If we can believe Walter Clark’s claim that five out of eight subjects reported their experience with LSD as ‘beyond anything ever imagined’, then it is easy to see how the transcendent possibilities of such drugs enticed a generation eager for sacred authenticity in a world that seemed so unjust. Psychedelic drugs were not merely escapist or self-indulgent, they offered seekers an opportunity to explore the limits of reality and then put that knowledge to some use in the world either individually or communally.

Timothy Leary’s often misunderstood exhortation to ‘turn on, tune in, drop out’, provides insight into the relationship between psychedelics and social action. In the context of a speech he was giving in New York, the full quote expresses a more optimistic sentiment:

Like every great religion of the past we seek to find the divinity within and to express this revelation in a life of glorification and the worship of God. These ancient goals we define in the metaphor of the present—turn on, tune in, drop out.\(^{51}\)

In later speeches he explains that ‘turning on’ means to get in touch with different levels of consciousness through psychedelics or other means. ‘Tuning in’, on the other hand, refers to the need to express the ‘wonder and the meaning’ you have discovered. ‘Drop out’ might be the most subversive since it does encourage one to turn their back on societal structures but it is also, for Leary, ‘a commitment to mobility, choice, and change’.\(^{52}\) To drop out is to take transcendent knowledge and use it to change the world for the better. Returning to Tipton’s utilitarian mode, the goal of maximising ‘good vibes’ still makes sense as a model for psychedelic morality but we have to acknowledge that the intent for some was to spread those good vibes throughout the world. For some, the receptivity of the psychedelic event was naturally and wholly connected to a problem-solving activism in the world.\(^{53}\)

**Technical Reason in the LSD Community**

Tipton emphasises the valuing of ‘ecstatic experience’ over ‘technical reason’ as a characteristic attitude of the sixties counterculture.\(^{54}\) The significance of ecstatic experience for hippies cannot be overstated, and the preceding overview reinforces the key role that the psychedelic evangelists had in spreading and talking up drug-induced ecstasy. He does not say it outright but it follows from Tipton’s moral schema that ecstatic experience operates in opposition to the notion of a biblical morality that is tightly connected to technical reason through its dialectical process. This has causal significance. If biblical law is broken down by hypocrisy and societal

\(^{51}\) Stevens, *Storming Heaven*, p. 326.


\(^{53}\) We tend to think of ‘activism’ as a process of social change but I think the broader sense of the word is appropriate here; psychedelics were connected to activity.

\(^{54}\) Tipton, *Getting Saved From the Sixties*, p. 21.
failure in the sixties, then a new pathway to certainty must be found. Psychedelic
drugs provided this opportunity; they offered spiritual seekers a way forward out of
a postmodern malaise. Tipton also presents technical reason as ‘rooted in the nature
of technological economic production’ that ‘permeates bureaucratic social
organisation’.\textsuperscript{55} Such bureaucratic processes are the societal extension of a utilitarian
individualism that would devalue the human being to the point of ‘adding his
private feelings and interpersonal responses into its calculations of efficiency’.\textsuperscript{56} If
counterculture society shifted to a consequentialist model driving toward the
increase of ‘good vibes’, then this kind of bureaucracy is the devil. I agree
wholeheartedly with Tipton’s assessment on that point but it is misleading insofar as
it immediately connects technical reason with this kind of soulless social system.

The first question to ask is whether or not technical reason is capable of
creating ‘good vibes’, and I think that the psychedelic movement knew that it could.
The most obvious example is in the creation of LSD itself, which requires significant
technical expertise and chemical equipment. A would be crafter of LSD would first
need to acquire the lysergic acid. Then, the chemist would need to work through an
isomerisation process using other toxic and potentially explosive chemicals. It is
worth remembering that the creator of LSD was an extremely skilled chemist and his
first dosage was still accidental. This kind of technical knowledge was not out of
reach for the enterprising and intellectually gifted psychedelic practitioner. Grateful
Dead supporter Owsley ‘Bear’ Stanley taught himself the process in the UC Berkeley
library and then went on to produce ‘five million trips’.\textsuperscript{57} It is not accidental that the
high priests and prophets of the psychedelic movement were often scientists and
medical doctors who were also conducting experiments concerning drug-induced
mysticism. A necessity for creating LSD, technical reason also carried broad
philosophical importance for the counterculture movement.

The psychedelic substance, in fact, is a kind of prosthetic device. It is the robot
arm or the artificial heart of the mind and spirit. A recent essay on psychedelics and
religious experience makes this explicit: ‘As the telescope is to astronomy, or the
microscope is to biology, so are entheogens to psychiatry and especially, to the
psychology of religious experience’.\textsuperscript{58} The author here is trying to emphasise that the
psychedelic does not create ecstatic experience out of itself but it is fascinating that he
chose to make this point through comparisons with scientific equipment. Whether
synthesised in a lab or taken straight from the ground, the psychedelic substance is
always a device added onto the human frame. It is telling that William Gibson, the
famous science-fiction author and creator of cyberpunk literature, was a friend to
Timothy Leary and deeply entrenched in the sixties counterculture. The vision of
cyberspace developed in \textit{Neuromancer}, his most famous book, reveals the influence of
the psychedelic scene:

\textsuperscript{55} Tipton, \textit{Getting Saved From the Sixties}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{56} Tipton, \textit{Getting Saved From the Sixties}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{57} Associated Press, ‘Owsley ‘Bear’ Stanley, 1960s counterculture character, dies at 76’,
\textsuperscript{58} W. Richards, ‘Entheogens in the Study of Religious Experiences’, \textit{Journal of Religion and Health}
Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...

Whether the trip is good or bad is up to debate but the dream of an ever-enhancing virtual reality; bright, bold, reality 2.0, is a child of the sixties counterculture movement. Timothy Leary himself embraced cyberculture in his later years and turned his most iconic phrase around for that purpose: ‘Turn on. Boot up. Download’. Mark C. Taylor writes,

The ‘60s technophobia always harbored a technophilia that promised to transform the chemico-religious prosthesis into the electronic prosthesis. After all, the vibrations that created the feelings of cosmic harmony were more often than not electronically generated.

Taylor is right, of course; the need for ecstatic experience was not satisfied with leaving the performance unplugged.

This reveals both a kind of consequentialist logic at work in the counterculture movement and sympathy toward the promise of technology. Tipton believes that the youth of the counterculture decade found some of their impulses unliveable and brought others with them into new religious movements. He makes a sensible argument on this point but it is possible that some of these counterculture instincts also informed the rise of computer and engineering technology. If we focus too much on the image of the simplified and communal counterculture of the wilderness, then we lose sight of the scientist counterculture born on the university campus. In addition to producing enough acid to get the entire San Francisco Bay Area high, Owsley ‘Bear’ Stanley worked sound engineering for the Grateful Dead and saw these two activities as intimately related. In an essay on music he writes,

I think my knowledge of the true nature of sound dates back to the period of the L.A. Acid Tests and specifically, one of the rehearsals we had in the house in Watts when I actually saw sound coming out of the speakers. It was total synesthesia, and I’ve never experienced that at any other time. It was just a unique experience. And it so completely blew my mind, that I realised, “Hey, no matter what, I’ve got to remember what this (the sound) is doing”. I went around and inspected it very carefully, and I spent a lot of time absorbing what it was doing and realising how different it was from what I thought sound did. And that became the foundation for all the sound work that I’ve done.
This ecstatic synesthetic experience became the basis for Bear’s complex technical experimentation with sound engineering while working concerts for the Grateful Dead. He was interested in pushing the limits of the mind with LSD and of music through the creation of the ‘Wall of Sound’, the enormous system that would sit behind the stage during Grateful Dead concerts. In a memorial note on the Grateful Dead fan page, bassist Phillip Lesh reflects on Bear’s work ethic:

He never gave up his quest for pushing the limits of whatever he was working on. We had just been discussing his concept of point-source sound reinforcement in relation to a new project of mine, and his vision incorporated the latest developments in technology and perceptual research.64

The counterculture community prided itself on the ability to test and push the limits of the individual human and society at large. Given the advancements of computer technology in the 1960s, the search for ecstatic experience became tightly connected to the promise of technical expertise.

Conclusion

The counterculture movement of the sixties played host to a range of contradictory impulses. The best way forward in trying to make sense of its depth and complexity is to seek an understanding of its primary motivations. This is where Tipton’s work is so valuable; his consequentialist model of a counterculture ethic aiming toward ‘good vibes’ allows us to make sense of where some of these contradictions were (are) leading. It allows us to make sense of a social climate that produced millions of hits of LSD and then developed a rescue service for those who lost themselves in nightmares. It allows us to make sense of the broad evangelising of the personal mystical experience and the activist drive to change society as a whole. And, finally, it allows us to make sense of a community that both hated the bureaucratic tendencies of technology, and longed for its promise of a new path toward the transcendent. By maintaining a sense of the tensions within sixties counterculture we gain a better understanding of the passions that fuelled it.