



Course: **Philosophy, Psychedelics and AI**
1120-IN000-ISA-0521
Coordinators: **dr Bartłomiej Skowron**

Period: **Summer Semester 2024/2025**
2025L
Approval date: **04.02.2025**

1. Course allocation

The course "Philosophy, Psychedelics, and AI" is designed for students interested in exploring the intricate relationships and unconventional intersections between contemporary philosophy and rapidly advancing, highly powerful technologies—on the one hand, psychedelic substances, and on the other, artificial intelligence, with a particular focus on large language models (LLMs).

Etymologically, the term 'psychedelic' translates to 'mind-revealing' and refers to a category of psychoactive substances like psilocybin, lysergic acid diethylamide, DMT, mescaline and others. These terms—variously referred to as phantastica, hallucinogens, entheogens, empathogens, entactogens and psychotomimetics—at first glance, reveal little about these substances. A deeper understanding emerges through analysing the highly unusual experiences they induce.

These experiences have been compared to near-death experiences, high-altitude mountaineering, ultramarathon running, the liminal state between sleep and wakefulness, mental illness and madness, deep meditative states, the effects of prolonged fasting, as well as numerous other states that are not induced by the consumption of the substances. They have also been likened to lucid dreaming, trance-induced states through rhythmic movement or music, deep sensory deprivation (floatation tanks), the euphoria and altered perception associated with falling in love, the deep existential reflection triggered by grief or personal loss, and the profound aesthetic immersion experienced when engaging with art or music. Such a profound, transformative and multifaceted existential experience could not have escaped the attention of philosophers, both past and present.

Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes and Christine Hauskeller argue that "Western philosophy starts in Ancient Greece, a culture evidently enthralled to practices of altering states of consciousness. The Pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus provided a taxonomy of plants, Pliny tells us, that induce various visions and exalted states of consciousness. Democritus himself became known for his 'madness' and was said to have 'travelled in the boundless', as Hippocrates apparently reported. Socrates, reports Plato, claimed that 'madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings'. Intoxication and ecstatic states were celebrated in Greece, through the Dionysian festivals that entranced Nietzsche, as well as through practices and millennia-old institutions such as the Eleusinian Mysteries." Contemporary philosophers who have reflected on mind-altering substances include William James, Henri Bergson, Walter Benjamin, John R. Smythies, Henry H. Price, and Aldous Huxley.

2. Conducting classes

In recent years, research on psychedelics has intensified, heralded as a "psychedelic renaissance" (Hadar et al., 2023), leading to the identification of many unexpected phenomena. A significant proportion of atheists who have used N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) report a transition to non-atheistic beliefs (Davis et al., 2020). Additionally, single psychedelic experiences have been shown to alter beliefs about consciousness attribution to both living and non-living entities (Nayak & Griffiths, 2022). Studies also indicate a tendency to move away from physicalist perspectives toward non-physicalist beliefs after psychedelic use (Timmermann et al., 2021). Psychedelics are increasingly recognized for their ability to induce profound shifts in ontological beliefs, often challenging foundational metaphysical worldviews.

What, then, do psychedelics and AI have in common? At first glance, they might share little to no connection. However, this initial impression is misleading. The development of both psychedelics and AI is often driven not only by the same financial capital but also by the same ideology (which should not be confused with philosophy). In particular, the ideology of Silicon Valley—sometimes referred to as TESCREAL—plays a crucial role. Throughout this course, we will critically examine it, analysing social fantasies, capital structures, and power dynamics.

Both psychedelics and AI can be understood as non-specific catalysts or amplifiers of the human psyche. Simply put, they may enhance empathy and kindness in empathetic and benevolent users, while reinforcing aggression in those with aggressive tendencies. Both also augment human sensory perception in distinct ways, generate novel and unconventional patterns (hence their popularity in artistic, creative, and engineering communities), and push the boundaries of our cognitive, perceptual, and even moral limitations. Given their profound impact on human consciousness, as well as the many unforeseen risks associated with them, both psychedelics and AI pose significant philosophical and ethical challenges.

Furthermore, both can be seen as hyperactive placebos in that they tend to provide outcomes that align—at least to some extent—with the user's expectations. Much of what emerges from interactions with these technologies serves as a mirror reflecting the user. Psychedelics reveal unconscious aspects of the self, while extended conversations with large language models (LLMs)—which we will focus on in this course—often reveal more about the user than about the technology itself, a phenomenon known as the *Reverse Turing Test*.

3. Course materials

Course Content

1. Definition and examples of classical psychedelics: psilocybin, lysergic acid diethylamide, 5-MeO-DMT, mescaline and others.
2. Will beliefs concerning the nature of reality, consciousness, mind, and free will change after psychedelic use? Do psychedelic substances increase environmental concern and strengthen liberal politics?
3. False insights, memories, psychedelic experiences and AI. Do psychedelics work by distorting users? Does AI work by distorting users?
4. Ontological shock and existential confusion. "More than half of those who identified as atheist before the experience no longer identified as atheist afterwards."
5. Ego dissolution, the myth of ego-death and transpersonal gratitude.
6. Awe (perceived vastness and a need for accommodation) and the small self.
7. To which entities do we attribute consciousness following a psychedelic experience? Do primates, quadrupeds, insects, fungi, plants, inanimate natural objects, and inanimate artificial objects possess consciousness? Does AI have, or will it attain consciousness?
8. Ambivalence towards the mystical in contemporary psychedelic research. The need for metaphysics in psychedelic therapy and research.
9. The phenomenology of the unity state induced by 5-MeO-DMT and the ontological aspects of Spinozism (monism, pantheism, panpsychism, and the eternal substance: the timelessness of pure Nature, God itself).
10. The epistemic gap between experiences and the descriptions of these experiences.
11. Light or Darkness? Is it better to remain in Plato's cave, illuminated by sunlight, or to engage in psychedelic interactions with Descartes' seductive demon? Are LLMs Descartes' seductive demons?
12. AI and psychedelic medicine: an innovative mental health treatment approaches.
13. AI and psychedelics as a moral enhancement: AI as a Socratic assistant (or digital therapist) and psilocybin as an effective moral bio-enhancer?
14. Do we learn more about the user or the substance during a psychedelic experience? Similarly, when studying the use of Large Language Models (LLMs), do we gain deeper insights into the user or the LLM itself? LLMs and the Reverse Turing Test.

4. Class attendance

Two unexcused absences from classes are permitted.

5. Verification of achievement of learning outcomes

Active class participation and an oral presentation by the student based on a selected topic and the latest literature.

6. Aids acceptable for use during verification of achievement of learning outcomes

Relevant scientific literature.

7. Rules for passing the course and for calculating the final grade

Active participation in classes, including engagement in discussions and group exercises (50%) and a presentation (50%). All course participants will assess participation and the presentation (peer evaluation).

8. Deadline and procedure for announcing grades

Grades will be assigned during the final class session.

9. Rules for retaking classes due to failure to pass a course

This is under internal regulations at PW and the Faculty.

10. Other

The detailed course literature will be provided to students during the course. Due to character limitations, it cannot be listed here.

I am open to suggestions for new topics proposed by students, provided that each proposed subject is grounded in research whose findings are documented in a scholarly article published in a reputable, internationally recognised journal.