

TO SEE AN ATOM

Steven Morgan (www.stevenmorganjr.com)

I left the American South with a Jesus on my shoulder. My new world, a leftist college out West, did not take so kindly. Beliefs that earned me friends and community at home now left me terribly alone. School did not help. Liberal arts classes exposed histories I could not reconcile with Christian legitimacy. For the first time, I doubted my religion, yet relinquishing Jesus meant betrayal—risking Hell, so I languished instead in a freeze. *To think freely, or obey.*

For six months I despaired in suicidal bewilderment. I kept it all secret. Then one night I ate mushrooms. Having ingested psychoactive plants plenty before, I knew the lay of the land, but this trip came on unusually strong. After listening to the mandatory *Dark Side of the Moon*, I lay down.

Moments later, a flood of dreams overcame me, dreams I had long forgotten. Each one I inhabited with all my senses, re-experiencing how I originally felt. Previously indecipherable, they were here linked together, and as a whole made sense. Just as I grasped their significance, I entered outer space. Floating, I saw Earth, a perfect sphere spinning. All my anxieties dissipated, replaced with ethereal lightness, and for a blessed few seconds, I *understood*.

Upon re-entering my body, the first thing I noticed was an alarm clock. I said out loud, heresy, *That's God*. Same to the poster, to the concrete wall, to the bedframe.

The next morning I threw away my statue of Jesus.

A week later, hungover with guilt, I worried whether my experience was real or a drug-induced stupor. I approached my philosophy of religion professor, who had just lectured on mystical experiences. Asking his judgement, I handed him great power. His answer:

Sometimes you need a microscope to see an atom.

His validation, even trust, legitimized my experience, casting it from purgatory into meaningful narrative. I told no one else, took no pride. I thought no more on it; thoughts were useless explorers of such terrain. But in having shaken loose my worldview, I became someone else, someone freer.

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Now imagine if I had first told this experience to a typical psychiatrist. Perhaps an assessment of my drug use would have followed (heavy); perhaps an analysis of sleep patterns, family history of mental illness, and previous experiences of altered states (all abnormal). Surely if I had revealed that my grandiose vision happened after six months of suicidal obsession—a phase endured twice before, they would have worried, maybe diagnosed. I know this: there would have been no talk of seeing atoms. Maybe serotonin though. Vulnerable, I would have walked away believing that in the worst case I was an addict or mentally ill, and in the best, my experience was a self-inflicted brain convulsion, meaningless.

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In my best estimation, what I saw at nineteen was Gaia, the name James Lovelock gives to the super organism that is planet Earth. Gaia is a conscious being who emerges from the sum of all life, much like we emerge from the sum of organs and blood and bacteria. In both instances, our actions and beingness cannot be explained by describing then adding our individual parts together. Something new, known as emergent phenomena, is born from their relational confluence.

Gaia is, in my embellishment, intelligent, acting in ways that nudge—not determine—things on the ground, albeit in ways impossible to comprehend. At a minimum, she enjoys surviving, growing lifeforms that create diverse systems which make her resilient against inputs and keeps her metabolism—er, climate—relatively stable. Gaia does not dictate the actions of those constituent beings that together give her rise, just as we do not consciously control our livers. Yet her behavior does impact those beings, who in turn impact her, just like flooding our liver with alcohol changes its function, in turn changing our consciousness, in turn changing the world, in turn changing us. The relationship between emergent phenomena and their parts is one seamless dance. Everything co-evolves as one.

Most scientists will now accept that Earth systems work together in profound ways to protect an evolving homeostasis. But few will speak of intelligence, let alone meaning. They are wrong.

I was shown Gaia at the height of existential malaise, when my waking state was at impasse. Mushrooms amplified my senses such that I could receive new insights, and from there I shed old ways and began anew. Was my body truly in outer space? It does not matter. Growth does not require physical coordinates. Metaphor or not, I made meaning, and meaning grows Gaia.

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Of course, Gaia, as a concept, is nothing new. Many past and present indigenous people have long traditions of beliefs and behaviors that reflect a holistic understanding of a living, creative, relational Earth. For several hundred thousand years before the advent of agriculture, when all people were hunter-gatherers living close to wild, I imagine everyone understood this reality.

The difference between how many of us live today and how all people lived for eons is not a matter of natural or unnatural—there is no *unnatural*, as everything comes from nature, including television. The difference is now we live surrounded by dead things. Take a look around: curtain, table, coffee cup, pen, computer, lights, bathroom, sink, clothes, air conditioning, whatever...all dead. We used to be surrounded by a living world. Not just us, but other animals and plants, which is why they are revolting.

That Gaia arose as a novel concept in science, maker of hard truth, reflects not its ingenuity, but the depravity of mainstream Western consciousness to salute the big wild. Only in a society starved of meaning and perception and surrounded by inanimate matter does claiming Earth as an intelligent creature become news.

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So what does a theory of mind look like in a culture of dead things?

It begins with isolation: *I think, therefore I am*. I am a mind with a body, and operate as an independent entity in a world of other independent objects and subjects. I am a personality who relates to objects and subjects, not a relational confluence. *You* and *I* can relate, but only as separate entities. As such, I am responsible for making decisions about my behavior towards other objects and subjects. Those decisions should be rational, or else the mind that drives them is *off*. Historically, from a European perspective, *off* was primitive, barbaric, sinful, bewitched; nowadays, immoral or medically sick. Yet no innate rationality or irrationality exists; humans have successfully lived in a huge variety of contradicting arrangements. What is rational, *on*, is a political determination, based on keeping particular economic and power relations in order.

For instance, if we take the perspective of a river, or her Salmon, or old growth forests on her banks, a dam blocking that river's flow is genocidal. I do not use that word lightly: a dam destroys entire populations of beings. I believe it perfectly rational to assume that

rivers, salmon, and old growth forests belong to the Earth no more or less than humans, serving vital functions in maintaining the health of Gaia, and should therefore be cultivated instead of assaulted. Rationally, I believe human beings can survive with rivers, salmon, and old growth forests in tact—as we did for hundreds of thousands of years; clearly an evidenced-based practice. So, a rational decision would be to remove the dam. Blow it up, go to jail. Against our economics maintaining a particular structure of power, I would be making an irrational, immoral, *off* choice.

Another example: a starving person with no money can be jailed if he walks into a grocery store and eats the abundant food on the shelf. A child can be punished for standing up in a boring class and walking into the forest for relief. An excited person can be locked in a cage for removing all their clothes because they want to feel air. A neighbor can be fined for drinking the river across invisible property boundaries because she is thirsty for real water.

Such actions are irrational only in context. That context, hidden by theories of morality and instituted by invisible laws, is today a dualistic materialism—subject/object—worldview that emphasizes parts and translates living beings into resources. When you take that approach—that Earth is to be used instead of treated like kin, you do reap a temporary bounty from killing her living organisms and converting them to machines. You make superior weapons and hoard endless food, which leads to more breeding, necessary ingredients for conquering others and subordinating Earth, for awhile. Seduced by such power, you are likely to harden the reductionistic beliefs that grant it: mandate curriculums that study parts; build an economics that separates then appraises lifeforms; praise religions that emphasize the individual with dominion over the planet; reward an intellectualism of memorized facts, particularly those that manipulate nature; farm until the soil dries, then spike it with fertilizer and plant rows of lab crops. You are likely to create a psychology of self; a deterministic psychiatry ruled by cause and effect; and a philosophy of detached reason and rationality. All entirely unnecessary for surviving the wild—and antithetical to understanding it, yet indispensable for maintaining a dualistic materialism. It comes at a cost.

Of course, I paint with broad strokes. Dualistic materialism has produced some good for some people, especially juxtaposed against other epochs of the last ten thousand years. I certainly benefit. Still, the best of those benefits—the increase in human rights as a political concept for large-scale societies, has paradoxically come at the expense of wild nature and exploited people. The very idea that seven billion humans are entitled to endless breeding,

food, shelter, and long life is a crisis for the planet: from where else will these limitless rights be actualized but a limited planet?

It is in this economic and political context—the one that treats human beings as individual subjects; maintains rights and privileges for some people and none for others, including other species; delineates property; perceives Earth as bounty—that rationality is determined. *Irrational*, then, is to think and behave non-linearly as a non-subject, to perceive more than parts, to feel plants as subjects not objects, to tune into connections and forces that cannot be measured in a lab.

We have a word for that.

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I am weary of iterating the term, solidifying it. The most benevolent translation of psychosis—*increase in psyche*, with psyche being the Greek term for *animating spirit*, is lovely, but love and psychiatry are at odds, so it has lost a bit of luster in their hands.

Several problems surround the concept. One, what we call psychosis is culturally determined, often so different between two individuals, even in the same culture, that the concept itself fails as a common descriptor. Two, wielding it uniformly produces a homogenous response that silences the diverse voices of people actually having the experiences—and includes the trapdoor, circuitous logic of *lacking insight* applied by professionals to experiencers with a differing view. Three, while I can speak of having so-called psychotic experiences, I have never been labeled that way (I was the convenient Bipolar *Part II*), and those experiences never impacted me such that I could have been tarred with more insidious psychiatric diagnoses. In other words, my lived experience is limited, therefore my perspective.

Despite my weariness and limitations, Gaia suggests an ecological function of mind—a reason why mind, in all its variations, exists—that I am compelled to explore. Here I have many allies, purveyors of unusual states of consciousness...unless and until it comes packaged in a person diagnosed with mental illness, at which point they defer to the authorities. Those authorities, psychiatrists, write off psychosis as the eruption of a purposeless disease, the edge where a meaningful mind stops. Arguing their case, they might reference dementia as a parallel: surely dementia is not purposeful in and of itself, as it clearly reflects biological aberration. While the billion dollar hunt for genes and molecules and neurochemicals correlated to psychosis continues without many touchdowns, even if there were a particular *biology of psychosis*, calling it a disease will be a judgement call made in a

particular political and economic context. For unlike dementia, or most other diseases, psychosis shows up in every culture we have looked, past and present. A universal experience is not a disease. It is a trait.

At base, that trait is an amplification of the senses—an *increase in psyche*, wherein more information than usual reaches consciousness. Some psychiatrists might agree, with the caveat that content matters. Yet judging some beliefs as delusional against others as objective reality fails every conceivable test of legitimacy. Belief is faith—our brains do not present the real world, and people of all stripes believe wild, irrational things: virgin births, good dams, evolution as mere competition. So either we are all psychotic, or the term must be extricated from belief. Which is not to say that unusual beliefs never appear when senses are amplified. They do: it can be hard to interpret all that information pouring in, especially without allies or guides. Sometimes confusion ensues. But an unusual mind against a frame of industrialized rationalism is not an illness. Sometimes it is that freedom we trade for modern sanity.

Many paths arrive at an increase in psyche. Perhaps after being harmed, I open my senses to stay alert and better read situations, a skill to survive one circumstance that overwhelms in another. Perhaps I disengage from feelings and keep secrets until my senses burst. Perhaps I develop relationships with immaterial beings for connection, or perhaps I can no longer take poverty, racism, and hate and tap instead into unadulterated joy. Perhaps I chase art or inquiry past their limits. And maybe I am having an allergic reaction, or flooding my serotonin receptors with LSD or state-sanctioned medicine, or bacteria in my gut is keeping me awake too long. Perhaps I am learning freedom, or maybe I am in fact designated to perceive larger intelligences. Maybe all at once.

Calling the end result a *disease*, in any case, presumes no purpose, which fits neatly with the dualistic materialism worldview that thinks of organs, like the brain, as collections of parts that can break. Gone is the notion that a brain might have its own emergent self-intelligence, that different brain states may be its way of carefully evolving. Not compensating, which presumes a holistic state of rationalism as baseline, but literally pushing towards something new, independent of will.

And there is a more convincing reason we should doubt psychosis as disease: you can eat plants to induce it. Animals do. So do other plants. Intentionally. Foods for psychosis exist in a huge variety of ecosystems and have so for millions of years, long before humans, performing vital functions for that system's health and evolution. Psychosis-inducing plants would be neither ubiquitous nor lasting if they or the states they produced were an

aberration or disease. Nature selected—rather, designed—this state of consciousness to survive.

Of course, one might argue psychosis is different from altered states produced by plants, and let them argue. Having smelled colors, heard ghosts, believed strange messages (like cutting off my left arm would stop me seeing red), been possessed by animal spirits, hallucinated, grown ecstatic, glimpsed Gaia, chatted with cartoons, and been overwhelmed by persistent paranoia and fear as well as giddiness while under the influence of LSD, a modified fungus, I cannot distinguish how such plant-induced experiences differ from what psychiatrists call psychosis, except the latter sometimes lasts longer.

So why does Earth contain plants that produce such an increase in psyche? Perhaps, as Stephen Harrod Buhner argues in *Plant Intelligence and the Imaginal Realm*, to depattern habits such that innovative forms of existence may be trialed. Not just for humans, but all lifeforms ingesting them. Buhner illustrates how psilocybin mushrooms, as one example, are found in grasslands on six continents distributing psychoactive compounds through exquisite root and mycelial networks to increase plasticity, resilience, and innovation in their neighborhoods. In other words, these mushrooms, as propellers of learning, increase knowledge in the whole system. That, and they break down dead matter so new life may arise. Is it too far a leap to assume they affect us similarly? And if those amplified senses produced by psychoactive plants are similar to those involuntarily experienced, is it too far a leap to assume that whatever the cause, the ecological function of both is to see, hear, feel, know differently in order to grow intelligence?

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No being is conscious of it, but brains and bodies utilize processes, collectively known as *sensory gating*, to siphon the mass of information hitting one's senses into a narrative that is coherent with a cultural or environmental context. As a result, ordinary consciousness perceives minuscule of what really exists. A Juniper tree has far more to see, hear, smell, taste, feel, intuit, and communicate than my capabilities. If I had eight eyes like a spider, or antennae like a bat, or stomata like a plant, I would understand the Juniper quite differently, yet never fully. Consciousness is by reduction: no combination of senses knows the breadth of a being.

But amplified senses get closer. Less sensory gating, less filtering, correlates with more perception and creativity, and is a double-edged sword. A musician who pays close attention to sound will overtime reshape their brain, open their gates, so they literally hear more of the

world. For myself, enhanced sonic perception means I can wail a Hendrix solo (sort of), yet that same reduction in filters allows the sounds of airplanes flying twenty thousand feet overhead to enter consciousness. Find me wearing noise-cancelling headphones in the wilderness.

That is the trade-off of amplified senses. They cannot easily be honed to perceive more information in one instance and none in another. They are, as the Icarus Project rightly names, dangerous gifts. By focusing exclusively on the first half of that dichotomy, *danger*—so often flamed by our practice of exporting fear, we squander their *gifting* potential to open new angles of knowledge, shake loose paradigms of selfhood and culture, expose secrets, create power and meaning, perceive more reality and contribute to evolution.

Lest I be accused of romanticizing, we need not revere psychosis to situate it as an evolutionary trait. Locating amplified senses as part of Gaia's DNA, however, we might seek less to move an individual back to their *baseline* and instead to move the culture's forward, which in turn might present more opportunities for people experiencing such states to have connection—that magical ingredient of the good life. For at what cost do we head the opposite of romance, towards a reason and rationality inseparable from industrialization? Reason, for all its political enlightenment, is inadequate for grasping people, let alone Gaia. Reason is how dominant culture desiccates meaning from a living world and replaces it with disinterested mathematics. Reason is why we curtail mind, designating parts as ill and waging war against their hosts. The results are in, and dismal. Perhaps a little more romance—the flirtation with potentiality—is just what the doctor needs to order.

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Six years after my out-of-body experience I had another period of psychic increase. The intervening years had been hard: I had been psychiatrically hospitalized three times. I took up meditating. After eight months of daily practice, one evening I drove home from the bookstore and hallucinated a wise man sitting on a rock. I had the sense that the evening meditation would be important.

As I rose from my zafu, I became a snake, then an elephant. I picked up my cat with my teeth on the back of her neck. I said to the ceiling fan, *That's God*. I watched myself disappear in a mirror, a void inside a golden outline. And I ate an apple—succulent and fresh, as for the first time.

The next morning I awoke with new sight. I saw colors around people, electricity in objects, patterns everywhere. I communicated with animals and they communicated with

me, sometimes in my language, sometimes in theirs. The experience lasted for several months, then faded.

During that time, I changed once again. On a whim I moved from Atlanta to Vermont, where I spent the next eight years in small communities acclimating to the rhythms of Earth. I often spent more time outdoors than indoors (*in* doors, what a phrase!). The connections I made to Earth grounded my psyche, tethering my ethereal longings—my nostalgia for wildness—to a planet full of living beings. I learned that I belong to Earth; Earth made me, my unwavering home. I learned that *I* am actually a host of trillions of other lifeforms, and that Gaia hosts me. A part inside a whole and a whole inside a part. A relational confluence behaving in an invisible political context that forces me to cut those relationships off. My longing will always be to reconnect.

I will never transcend my privileged, reasoned worldview, despite what plenty of New Age, self-help, and religious books proclaim is possible. But I can learn something new, from which I might trial new ways of being with Earth. Perhaps Gaia would appreciate that now that dominant culture is wrecking millions of years of evolution and intelligence. If so, I am not convinced we can reason and rationalize our way there, as such positivist orientations to a living world are the wrecking balls. To break down old forms of being—to clear the way like mushrooms in a grassrange, we need new eyes, ears, tongues, hearts, microscopes and macroscopes.

Where will these be found?