“I imagine that right now you’re feeling a bit like Alice. Tumbling down the rabbit-hole? . . . You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.”

— Morpheus to Neo in The Matrix

Since its publication in 1865 Alice in Wonderland has become our defining cultural myth of distorted reality. We’re all familiar with the characters (the Caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, the Mad Hatter), the key phrases (“Off with their heads!”; “Curiouser and curiouser!”; “We’re all mad here.”), and the plot (Alice falls into a rabbit-hole, gets lost in Wonderland, and has a
series of bizarre encounters as she tries to find her way home. Many of us also associate drugs, specifically hallucinogenic drugs, with *Alice*. Indeed, Alice’s journey can be read as an allegory for an intense drug experience. Rephrasing the plot only slightly, Alice gets lost and tries to find her way back to *normal reality*. Within the story are specific allusions: the Caterpillar smokes a hookah, Alice drinks mysterious liquids and eats mushrooms, Alice’s perceptions of time and space are altered, and the impossible is everyday. The association of drugs with *Alice* is so established that *alice* is now a slang term for LSD.\(^1\)

**But Is It a Drug Story?**

Because *Alice* flavors drug use and depiction, there is an urge to retroactively read drug imagery into the story. For example, is it a coincidence that users *trip* on drugs and Alice goes on a *trip* to Wonderland, even sort of *tripping* to fall down the rabbit-hole? This is one way to go with an essay on *Alice in Wonderland* and drugs, to look for every possible allusion or depiction of drugs\(^2\) and argue that the whole story is inspired by, a celebration of, or a guide to hallucinogenic drugs. If that’s the sort of thing that interests you, it’s a Google search away. For the purposes of this essay I’ll use *Alice* as a guide to metaphysics (the study of reality) and epistemology (the study of knowledge), specifically the impact of drugs on perception and knowledge of reality.

The first big obstacle to thinking about the effect drugs have on Alice is that she doesn’t actually ingest anything until *after* she has seen a talking rabbit, fallen down an almost bottomless pit at a comfortable speed, landed softly on the ground, and seen the same rabbit use a door, closing it behind him. In other words, Alice’s world is already bizarre before she takes any drugs. This has to raise the question of whether we read too much into the story when we attribute the strangeness to drugs. Perhaps a literal reading is more appropriate: the story
is a fantasy; the normal rules of the world are out the window; the “Drink Me” liquid, “Eat Me” cake, and mushroom do only what the narrator says, make Alice bigger or smaller. In a land as strange as Wonderland, this makes the drugs not all that special.

We learn at the end of the book that Alice has dreamed the whole story of Wonderland while sleeping under a tree avoiding her lessons. Reconsidering the story with this in mind, certain things make sense: the talking animals and playing cards, the importance of physical size (a pressing issue to a child who wishes she were older), the manifestation of Alice’s desires (doors, magic potions), the dream-logic of the story (events beginning and ending abruptly in sync with the shifting attention of the dreamer). The revelation of the dream offers another viable reason for why normal rules are off, and looking at the perceptual and epistemological challenges of dreams will be the second main emphasis of this chapter.

Before we move on to philosophical analysis, let’s examine a scene from Through the Looking-Glass, the sequel to Alice in Wonderland. In Through the Looking-Glass, Alice once again finds herself in a fantastical world, this time the other side of a looking glass. And once again we will learn that Alice has dreamed the whole thing up. In this dream, in chapter four of the novel, Tweedledee tells Alice the sleeping Red King is dreaming her into existence. The Alice in the story doesn’t know that she’s in a dream, and therefore doesn’t think to ask if the real her, the one having the dream, is also being dreamed into existence, but we do know and we do ask. It’s implied by analogy: If the Alice in the looking glass can be dreamed into existence by the Red King, can’t the Alice in Through the Looking-Glass, who is dreaming of the other Alice and the King, be herself dreamed into existence by another being? The analogy is transparent to us. Lewis Carroll has dreamed up the Alice who dreams up the King who dreams up Alice. Except there’s more. The character Alice was based on Alice
Liddell, a real girl Carroll knew and spent time with. The question then becomes, Who, if anyone or anything, dreamed up Liddell? And also, who dreamt Carroll? There’s a kind of answer to this last: Charles Dodgson dreamed up Carroll as a pen name, but this just begs the question.

Anyone who’s smoked a little pot will recognize this as classic drug thinking, which is not necessarily to say it’s bad thinking, just that it’s inconclusive (like most philosophy?) and takes the metaphysical ground out from under the reader of Alice’s feet just as Wonderland and the looking glass take it out from under Alice’s. We have a hard time saying much of anything substantive about the books, least of all the drugs, because everything is already called into question by the suspension of the normal rules of reality. It follows from this suspension that any connections between the story and the outside world are speculative and inconclusive. But there’s at least one good reason that in the face of these epistemological obstacles we can do better than throw our hands up in defeat.

Life Is But a Dream?

Whether Alice is tripping or dreaming or actually in a fantastical world, her experience of reality is the same. She experiences it as if it is real. We know this as readers because her experience is given to us on the page and we have no reason to doubt the experience even as we might look for explanations of the causes of the experience. And so, as readers, we accept that Alice thinks she’s, say, talking to a rabbit even if we don’t think she’s really talking to a rabbit. The difference between Alice’s experience and our understanding of Alice’s experience is much like the difference between accepting the story as a credulous child might and thinking about it critically. My main argument, as I’ve already hinted, is going to be that this distinction between a normal and distorted experience is exaggerated if not spurious insofar as normal is suggestive of real. What normal
experience actually means is not that we experience things as they are, but that we experience things as we normally experience things. We know that our experiences and perceptions are affected by expectations, weather, light, emotions, hormones, alertness, diet, exercise, personality, childhood trauma, and so on. This could be a very long list, to say nothing of drugs we may have ingested—prescription meds, nicotine, alcohol, caffeine, St. John’s wort, Tylenol, and so on, another long list. It’s not as if we see perfectly clearly until we dream or drink a mysterious liquid, at which point things go suddenly crazy. Objectively speaking, things already are crazy. And so, how do we trust our perceptions, whether awake or dreaming, sober or intoxicated?

Keeping in mind that our conceptions of normal and distorted are contingent on the way we habitually see things and that we have at best a weak claim to a real reality, let’s look at the drugs and dreaming in Alice in Wonderland as paradigmatic cases of how reality—experience of reality—changes. The reasons I’m treating drugs and dreams so closely is that (1) they are so intermingled in Alice; and (2) in everyday life we act on the assumption that there is a clear demarcation between normal consciousness (lucid, waking thought) on the one hand and distorted consciousness (intoxication, dreaming) on the other.

Two philosophers who take on the problem of perception in a suitably Alice-like fashion are Plato and Chuang Tzu, each of whom writes about dreaming and self-identity. Plato, in Theaetetus, portrays a dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus.

Socrates: How can you determine whether at this moment we are sleeping, and all our thoughts are a dream; or whether we are awake, and talking to one another in the waking state?

Theaetetus: I do not know how to prove the one any more than the other, for in both cases the facts precisely
correspond; and there is no difficulty in supposing that
during all this discussion we have been talking to one
another in a dream; and when in a dream we seem to
be narrating dreams, the resemblance of the two states
is quite astonishing.

Socrates: You see, then, that a doubt about the reality
of sense is easily raised, since there may even be a doubt
whether we are awake or in a dream.⁴

Compare those lines from Plato with these from Alice:

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice
remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all
mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad”? said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have
come here.”⁵

The Cheshire Cat signals (to the knowing reader) that
Alice is necessarily mad because she’s in a dream. This could
work for us as readers, but Alice lacks the privileged knowl-
edge that we have (that she’s dreaming), so to her the Cat’s
words come across as either wrong (she doesn’t feel mad) or
meaningless (how does he know?). And this is largely Plato’s
point in Theaetetus: neither in waking life nor dreaming life
does one (usually) know with certainty which state one is in,
and therefore we must be aware at all times of the possibility
that we are mad.

A similar epistemological problem is raised in Alice when
Alice meets the Caterpillar. She tells the Caterpillar, “Being
so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.” When he
denies this, Alice goes on: “Well, perhaps you haven’t found
it so yet, but when you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will
some day, you know—and then after that into a butterfly,
I should think you’ll feel it a littler queer, won’t you?” Again
the Caterpillar denies her. Now Alice makes a partial concession: “Well, perhaps your feelings may be different, all I know is, it would feel very queer to me.”6 This time, instead of denying Alice, the Caterpillar inquires directly into who is the Alice who would feel queer changing into a chrysalis and then a butterfly. This question of identity is interesting because it forces Alice to wonder: if she changes so much, is there a part of her that is the real Alice?

The ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu raises a similar butterfly question: “Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn’t know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn’t know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.”7 In terms of Alice, how does Alice know she’s not a butterfly dreaming she’s Alice, or a giant Alice dreaming she’s a small Alice, or a different girl dreaming she’s Alice, or so on? And then how do we know we’re not butterflies dreaming we’re human, or humans dreaming or hallucinating (for whatever reason)? Strictly speaking, we don’t. We can’t escape a measure of skepticism regarding our perceptions and identities, and yet we usually proceed as if our perceptions are reliable. And what do perceptions tell drug users, dreamers, and Alice, in addition to us in our normal waking hours? That this is real.

**The Land of the Real?**

“Remember all I’m offering is the truth.”

—Morpheus to Neo, again, in *The Matrix*

“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
A number of people, and even a few philosophers, have claimed that the distortions from normal perception that drugs induce actually sometimes lead to a truer, realer understanding of reality, not away from it. This is a deeply counterintuitive position, because, as Bertrand Russell writes, “In the search for certainty, it is natural to begin with our present experiences, and in some sense, no doubt, knowledge is to be derived from them. But any statement as to what it is that our immediate experiences make us know is very likely to be wrong.” Such a statement would very likely be wrong because of the numerous imperfections with our perception: we see and hear only thin bands from the spectra of light and sound, and generally then only on scales that have been evolutionarily advantageous, and still with flaws.

But the argument that drugs can lead to a realer understanding of reality isn’t that drugs improve perception. The position is actually that some drugs can sometimes precipitate a mystical experience, and in a mystical experience one sees the world as it truly is. Often this involves dissolving the separation between subject and object, and comes with an unflappable conviction that one is seeing things as they really are. The conundrum is that the mystic is sure that he sees how things really are but the experience is limited to himself. No one else can access it or verify it. But still, the mystic maintains, he’s sure—or he was sure while he was in the mystical state.

As I’ve said, I’m skeptical of what it would even mean to know reality as such, and not as a human knowing it, except that I’ve had experiences that have seemed more real to me than my normal experience—and some of these experiences have been under the influence of drugs.

The first time I ate hallucinogenic mushrooms I went with some friends (also on psilocybin) to walk around the forest by the river near where we lived. I have no sense of how long we were there. Time was utterly irrelevant to me. I was so engrossed by my surroundings that I stopped thinking
about anything that wasn’t immediately present. My attention became increasingly focused until I was aware not of the forest but a pocket of it and eventually a single plant in the undergrowth. I studied the plant carefully, getting to know its movements and patterns. When I felt like I was really understanding the plant I looked down my arm to my fingers, which had been caressing the leaves, to find that I couldn’t tell where my fingers left off and the leaves began. My hands and the plant’s branches were connected quite seamlessly and naturally. Now, a few things were going on. Visually and tactically, there was no separation between the plant and me, but at the same time part of me knew that my arm wasn’t a plant and that it just seemed that way because of the mushrooms. And yet I was grateful because I knew I was learning something, viscerally instead of abstractly, about the way I was connected to my environment. While I’m disinclined to trust the hallucination completely, the insight was certain and remains with me in a diluted form to this day. That it sounds kind of silly now I take as proof of the ineffability of the insight, not as a failure of the insight itself.

I’m not sure how much to read into this— isn’t my connection to the earth a degree or two less literal than it seemed on mushrooms?— but other philosophers have used drug experiences to support broader metaphysical claims than mine. Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) recounts his first experience with mescaline in his book *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley writes of being “shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and the inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with survival or to a human being obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large.” Mescaline for Huxley offered a way of knowing things objectively, apart from his normal and limited perspective. “I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.”
This is a pretty big claim, and we have to ask how it is that mescaline allows Huxley to see naked existence. Huxley’s answer is that because mescaline precipitates ego loss, there is no sense of a seer who sees. Instead there is only what is seen in pure awareness, “Mind at Large.” This raises a question: Is the state of there not seeming to be a seer the same as the state of there not being a seer? If not, then the feeling of pure awareness might be less real than normal awareness because even though the seer’s perceptions are still influencing the seen, the awareness of that influence is lost. It is almost impossible to argue against the influence of subjectivity because we cannot get outside of our own subjectivity to have anywhere to argue from. Except, Huxley tells us, that when you experience pure awareness, you can tell your perceptions are realer. And for good reason.

Huxley appeals to the work of Dr. C. D. Broad (1887–1971), who describes the brain as a filter of the world’s innumerable stimuli. Using Broad’s theory, Huxley argues that mescaline and other hallucinogens turn off the reducing valves of our brains and give us short-term peeks into a less filtered, if not unfiltered, reality. Alice for her part never seems to experience true ego loss. Her perceptions and her sense of self are altered but never lost. She sees differently but never with Huxley’s “Mind at Large.”

In *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*, Huston Smith (b. 1919) describes his first experience with entheogens. Like Huxley, Smith took mescaline (under the guidance of Timothy Leary, then of Harvard, at the suggestion of Huxley, who was a colleague of Smith’s at MIT). Smith, a religious scholar, had studied mysticism and practiced meditation for decades “with disappointing results, I have to confess.” He goes on: “I do not regret those years, and continue to meditate each day, but it does more to strengthen my life’s trajectory and call me back to the here and now than it does to produce mystical visions and altered states of consciousness.” As for those
altered states of consciousness, Smith says, “when Huxley’s *Doors of Perception* appeared, the mescaline it reported sounded like a Godsend—literally. . . . [Mescaline] introduced him to ‘the flow of beauty to heightened beauty, from deeper to ever deeper meaning.’ Perhaps it could do the same for me.”

Once Smith ingested the mescaline, “the layers of the mind, most of whose contents our conscious mind screens out to smelt the remainder down into a single band we can cope with, were now revealed in their completeness—spread out as if by spectroscope into about five distinguishable layers. . . . I was experiencing the metaphysical theory known as emanationism, in which, beginning with the clear, unbroken Light of the Void, that light then fractures into multiple forms and declines in intensity as it devolves through descending levels of reality.”

Just as my first psilocybin experience allowed me to experience directly my connection with nature, Smith’s experience allowed him to see things he had previously understood only abstractly.

It’s not important for our purposes what emanationism is all about. What is important is that (1) Smith saw things differently; and (2) what he saw felt overwhelmingly real. Something worth considering here is that Smith and I both saw what we were looking for. Most people who have used hallucinogenic drugs will know what I mean. Those who have not may get some sense of it from reading *Alice*. When Alice takes drugs they make her larger or smaller as she needs them to, but not always to the degree she’d like. This is the kind of control most people have of their drug experiences. There’s room to guide, but not control. Timothy Leary talks about this in terms of “set”: “The nature of the experience depends almost entirely on set and setting. Set denotes the preparation of the individual, including his personality structure and his mood at the time.” Drugs magnify what’s already there.
Even before Huxley and Smith, the philosopher William James (1842–1910) experimented with drugs. Consider what he has to say about his experience with nitrous oxide:

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 consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in 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. Looking back on my own experience, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposite of the world, whose contradictions and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity.\(^{15}\)

What’s most valuable about this quote from James is the idea that we not discount experiences on drugs out of hand. They may or may not show us something more \textit{real}, but they certainly show us something different.\(^{16}\) And for that we must be able to take account when we speak of \textit{reality}. The problems of dreams
and trusting our own perceptions at any time (because of all the assumptions we naturally make) show us that we never have the authority to simply dismiss abnormal experiences, because by definition all of our experiences appear to us as our experiences. As Alan Watts points out: “[A] man who mistrusts himself cannot even trust his mistrust, and must therefore be hopelessly confused.”

The Real Is Fake and the Fake Is Real

Drugs and dreams dissolve the distinction between normal and distorted reality by calling to our attention the faulty assumptions under which this distinction is made. *Alice in Wonderland*—drug story, dream story, cultural myth—presents these dilemmas for us. In fact, it raises them so well that *Alice in Wonderland* (a drug trip inside a dream inside a fantasy inside two pieces of cardboard) has become the name for a real, diagnosable medical syndrome: it describes a condition where a person suffers from distorted space, time, and body image. Spells are temporary and often associated with migraines or psychoactive drugs. If that sends your mind spinning back and forth between fact and fiction, it should. The real is fake; the fake is real; and you must trust yourself to know what’s what, keeping in mind of course that you must also trust your informed distrust. Drugs, dreams, and a little critical thinking go a long way toward showing us that our everyday waking life is a lot more like Alice’s trip to Wonderland than we might normally think.

As for Alice, we know that when she wakes up she thinks to herself that she’s had a wonderful dream. We assume such a wonderful dream will stick in her memory, but we don’t expect it to feel real for her in the same way it felt real while she was dreaming it. In this respect, Alice’s story differs from ours. When we wake from a dream, come down from a high, or return to normal reality from some other altered state, there
is always the chance that the lingering traces of the experience will retain their credibility even as they lose their immediacy. If they don’t retain their credibility, then we are, like Alice, occasionally mad, and this—normal reality—is all there really is. But if our distorted experiences do linger, as the mystical ones often seem to, maybe our normal experience of reality is partial. Whether distorted reality has anything to offer us is left to each of us to determine for ourselves. I follow William James in saying, “It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be such superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world.”18 Most questions surrounding perception and reality are open ones. One of the only certainties is that the rabbit-hole is very deep indeed.

NOTES

1. Interestingly, Albert Hoffman invented LSD while searching for a cure for migraines, which Lewis Carroll suffered from, and some think influenced his writing about distorted reality.
2. One such allusion for those who are looking for such things might be Alice’s inquiries into self-identity. Are the inquiries the rational response of a conscious being in the world—the human condition, sober or intoxicated—or are they meant to suggest the intense introspection often brought on by the drugs we associate with Alice, marijuana and hallucinogens?
3. I should reemphasize that I don’t think Alice’s Adventures are strictly drug stories the way Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is; Alice is just well-suited to a drug reading in the way The Matrix is well-suited to a drug reading or a Christian reading or a Buddhist reading or a cyborg reading or many other readings.
6. Ibid., 49.
10. Ibid., 17.
11. I have in mind here the repeating theme of Alice’s discontinuity of self.
13. Ibid., 10–11.
16. They may even help us to understand Hegel. NO2 did for James. As he writes in his essay “Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide”: “Some observations of the effects of nitrous-oxide-gas-intoxication . . . have made me understand better than ever before both the strength and the weakness of Hegel’s philosophy.”