

Fractured Selves, Unfinished Worlds: Ontological Agility in Psychedelic Mysticism

The Phenomenology of Psychedelic Mysticism
and the Challenges of Secular Integration

Master of Theology in
Intercultural Encounters
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*If you are reading this,
you have already left the framework.
You are the footnote to your own thought.
This thesis is not a thesis.
It is a portal in disguise.*

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In addition, co-researchers were invited to contribute footnotes to this thesis, offering reflections, critiques, or extensions of the themes discussed. These marginalia appear throughout the work as part of the methodological and ontological ethos of the study. They are not treated as data, but as co-creative traces that honor the unfinished, relational, and plural nature of meaning-making in psychedelic integration. *They do not explain the text—they interrupt, deepen, or defy it.*

Abstract: This thesis argues that integration, in the aftermath of psychedelic-induced mystical experiences, is not resolution but *ontological agility*—a lived practice of moving-with uncertainty.

It explores the ontological impact of such experiences in secular contexts, focusing on how individuals navigate the existential disorientation they can provoke. While contemporary research often emphasizes therapeutic or spiritual outcomes, this study foregrounds ontological rupture: the destabilization of reality itself. It asks what integration might mean when meaning refuses to cohere.

Grounded in the ontological turn in anthropology and philosophy, this work introduces *ontological agility* as the capacity to inhabit multiple, often conflicting realities without

collapsing them into a single truth. Using modified Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it draws from in-depth interviews with three secular individuals who experienced psychedelic mystical states and have relied primarily on self-directed integration.

Findings reveal that co-researchers did not integrate their experiences into fixed worldviews, but instead engaged in ongoing ontological negotiation—oscillating between materialist, mystical, and hybrid framings. Rather than seeking a singular, stable framework, individuals develop the capacity to engage with contradictory ontologies without collapsing into either extreme.

This thesis challenges dominant models of psychedelic integration that seek narrative closure or psychological restoration. Instead, it argues for a model that honors ambiguity, contradiction, and the refusal of epistemic finality—offering new insight into the phenomenology of mystical experience in secular life.

you are now inside the thesis



Scan to enter the sonic layer.
Curated by Mira, Elias, and Lucian.

Table of Contents: The Reluctant Attempt to Organize Chaos

Foreword: How to Catch Smoke in a Butterfly Net.....	5
1. Introduction – Entering the Fracture.....	8
1.1. Integration as Ontological Agility.....	9
1.2. Co-Researchers: Living the Fracture.....	10
1.3. Questions Without Closure: The Stakes of This Inquiry.....	10
1.4. The Structure of the Thesis: A Nonlinear Map.....	11
2. Literature Review – Between Meaning and Mystery.....	13
2.1. Secular Spiritualities: Mysticism without a Compass.....	14
2.2. Mystical States and Secular Flesh: Where the Ineffable Takes Form.....	17
2.3. Destabilizing Realities: The Aftermath of Mystical States	19
2.4. Dwelling as Practice: Self-Guided Integration in a Fractured World.....	21
3. Theoretical Framework – Walking on Ontological Eggshells.....	25
3.1. Other Worlds, Other Ways of Knowing: The Ontological Turn.....	25
3.2. Rethinking Integration Between Worlds.....	27
3.3. Listening from Within: Research as Relational Method.....	30
4. Methodology – An Ontological Gesture.....	33
4.1. Tracing Fractures: Data as Dialogue, Analysis as Co-Habitation.....	34
4.2. I Was There, Too: Reflexivity as Ontological Labor.....	37
5. Findings as Fragments	39
5.1. When the Ground Falls Away: The Fracturing of Reality.....	40
5.2. Disbelief and Devotion: Living Between Skepticism and Surrender.....	42
5.3. Cracks in the Secular: Friction at the Edge of Reason.....	45
5.4. Communion Without a Church: The Dislocated Need for Witness.....	48
5.5. Echoes of What Cannot Be Named: Living the Aftermath.....	52
5.6. Returning to the Research Questions.....	56
6. Discussion – Living-With: Agility in the Aftermath.....	58
6.1. From Ontological Disruption to Coexisting Realities.....	60
6.2. Practicing Agility: Forms of Integration Beyond Closure.....	64
6.3. What is Ontological Agility? (This is Not the Answer).....	68
6.4. [Here, The Chapter Refuses to Speak].....	71
6.5. Living-with-Not-Knowing: Ambiguity as Ontological Integrity.....	72
7. Conclusion – Fractured Selves, Unfinished Worlds.....	75
7.1. What This Work Has Offered; and What It Refuses to Resolve.....	76
7.2. Beyond the Fracture: What the Mystery Asks of Us Next.....	78
7.3. The Violence of Naming, the Grace of Not-Knowing.....	81
Coda: Spiraling Through Thin Air.....	84
Attachments.....	89
References.....	93

Foreword:

How to Catch Smoke in a Butterfly Net

This is not quite a thesis. A thesis, in its traditional form, is a boundary—a container drawn around a question, taming it into something answerable. But some questions resist capture. Some dissolve when held too tightly.

This work does not aim to pin meaning to a board. It invites us to notice how meaning moves. It is not merely here to be an argument, but the shimmer at the edge of language. Not to conclude, but to echo. Not to define, but to shimmer at the edge of language. If a thesis must be a structure, let this be scaffolding around an unfinished space. If it must make a claim, let it be a tide—advancing, retreating, reshaping the shore of what may be said.

Call it a thesis if you must. But press your ear to it. Something else¹ is breathing underneath—something this form cannot fully hold, but does not fully silence either.

There are ways of knowing that do not arrive through certainty. Theology, at its best, has always known this. It carries a lineage of experiential, embodied, and apophatic insight—forms of understanding that do not merely speak *about* the divine, but *from within* its breath. This work stands in that lineage. It emerges not in rebellion against method, but as a remembering of what method once served—and what it might still hold space for.

Yes, I translate. I use the structures I’ve inherited, even as I stretch them to hold what they were not designed for. But not to abandon theology or academia—to deepen their reach. To answer a call that arises from within the work itself: to speak from lived experience, from situated positions, from the fractures where coherence fails and something truer slips through.

¹ † **Mira:** You do realize this sounds like a cortical hallucination flirting with literary erotica, right? That said, I appreciate the audacity. But let me speak as a cognitive scientist for a moment: calling something “something else” doesn’t exempt it from structure—it just changes the frame. The brain doesn’t toggle between poetry and logic; it conducts both simultaneously. Even your “shimmer at the edge of language” rides on oscillatory coherence across the left temporal lobe. Beauty has bandwidth. And mystery doesn’t disappear just because I can track its blood flow.

There is a tendency in academic discourse—especially around taboo subjects or altered states—to approach with gloves made of silk or skepticism. This can be well-intentioned. But care is not the same as distance. And reverence is not the same as restraint. There are truths that arrive ragged, luminous, partial—and they deserve to be held without being polished away.

So, I begin—not with a conclusion, but with a willingness to follow what cannot be fully named. I do not know if I will ever have the freedom to let the work take the shape it truly desires. Perhaps that freedom comes with time, or with credentials, or with some imagined arrival into legitimacy. (I hear the counterarguments already: Not credentials—wisdom! Experience! But tell me: how many years must one live before being permitted to speak what they have already known for decades?)

Thankfully, I did not do this alone.

To my co-researchers—**Mira**, **Lucian**, and **Elias** (pseudonyms)—this work carries your voices, even when it cannot fully contain them. You did not offer me data; you offered me passage. Mira, you dissolved and reassembled, translating the ineffable through breath and stillness. Lucian, you stood at the crossroads of mysticism and skepticism, laughing and bowing at once. Elias, you fled your reflection, only to find that love lives not in the seeing, but in the staying.

Your stories are not citations. They are not artifacts. They are not meant to be embalmed in the rigid language of analysis. They are points of departure—reminders that some forms of knowing must be lived, not argued.

If I were to describe this in institutional terms, I might say it is a study of psychedelic integration in secular contexts—a phrase that suggests neatness, even closure, as if meaning-making were ever final. But if you have ever dissolved beneath a psychedelic sky, or loved with your whole being, or stared too long into the night, then you already understand:

Nothing integrates completely.

Meaning slips.

The self reforms.
The sacred refuses to sit still.²
So no, this is not a study of how integration happens.
It is about how it slips through our hands.
It is about what remains.
The breathless hush.
The self that was, but is no longer.
The space where the experience was—
—and still flickers.

To **Professor Terhi Utriainen**, whose scholarship I deeply admire, and whose spacious intellect and academic work recognize that even when smoke resists containment, it still deserves to be studied with care.

To **Maija Harju**, who offered the most incisive, devoted readings—and whose presence in my life is itself a psychedelic experience. Your friendship is an integration circle without end: disorienting, dazzling, and impossibly alive.

And to **Dr. Maija Butters**, whose course and passion first cracked the door open to the ontological turn. That door never closed.

And if you finish reading this feeling like something vast has just escaped you—like you almost grasped it, but it slipped through at the last second—

*You caught smoke in a butterfly net.*³

² † **Mira:** Neither does the salience network. Coincidence?

³ ‡ **Lucian:** You position yourself as transgressing form, but mysticism already destabilizes academic language, and it doesn't need your permission to do so. Within the humanities, paradox isn't subversive; it's expected. If you want to truly unsettle, name the impasse as intrinsic, not stylistic.

1. Introduction

– Entering the Fracture

Mystical experiences—once nestled in religious traditions—are increasingly emerging in secular contexts: existential crises, philosophical inquiry, scientific laboratories, and non-traditional spiritual subcultures (Jones, 2022; Van der Tempel & Moodley, 2020). The psychedelic renaissance has accelerated this shift, renewing interest in how substances like psilocybin, LSD, and DMT induce profound alterations in consciousness—experiences often marked by ego dissolution, unity, and existential intensity (Barrett & Griffiths, 2018; Letheby & Gerrans, 2017).

Contemporary research largely emphasizes the therapeutic promise of psychedelics (Maia et al., 2024; Griffiths et al., 2006). Yet beyond healing lies another domain: ontological disruption. Psychedelic-induced mystical experiences often unsettle the very scaffolding of perception, generating not resolution but disorientation.

In this thesis, "mystical experience" refers specifically to extraordinary, often ineffable states of consciousness characterized by unity, ego dissolution, and profound existential intensity (Stace, 1960; Barrett et al., 2015). "Spirituality," by contrast, is used more broadly to describe individual orientations toward meaning, connection, or transcendence, often beyond formal religious structures (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). While mystical experiences may catalyze spiritual identity shifts, they are not assumed to overlap: spirituality in this study is treated as a lived orientation, mystical experience as a discrete event or state. Rather than restoring coherence, these encounters can fracture one's assumptions about self, reality, and knowledge itself (Letheby, 2021; Nour et al., 2016).

For religious practitioners, these experiences are usually held within theological frameworks—doctrines that absorb and reinterpret them (James, 2002). Secular individuals, in contrast, lack ready-made containers for such ontological upheavals (Breeksema & van Elk, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2018). So, what happens when the experience resists psychological or spiritual assimilation? When it defies the tenets of materialist

rationality—a worldview shaped by empiricism, scientific skepticism, and the rejection of metaphysical claims?

This thesis explores how secular individuals navigate entheogenic encounters that do not affirm, but disrupt, their pre-existing worldview. It asks not only how integration is attempted, but whether integration—understood as resolution—is even possible.

1.1. Integration as Ontological Agility

Psychedelic research often frames integration as a therapeutic task: stitching extraordinary experiences into a coherent psychological narrative (Gorman et al., 2021; Palitsky et al., 2023). This assumes a return to wholeness. But what if integration introduces irreconcilable contradictions instead?

This study proposes a different model: *integration as ontological agility*—the capacity to live between and with conflicting realities without collapsing them. Secular individuals often oscillate between belief and doubt, intuition and skepticism. Some construct hybrid worldviews; others dwell in paradox. In this model, integration is an ongoing negotiation of reality itself.⁴

Drawing from anthropology and philosophy, this study positions epistemic multiplicity as a condition of modern existence (Viveiros de Castro, 2015; Haraway, 1988). Liminality theory (Turner, 1969) and post-structuralism (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) further suggest that transformation emerges not through synthesis, but through inhabiting rupture. This raises a central question: How do secular individuals navigate experiences that challenge the foundation of their worldview? Can integration be reimaged—not as psychological recovery, but as a practice of ontological agility?

⁴ † **Mira:** Negotiation, yes—but let’s not pretend this is a UN summit between mutually consenting ontologies. Sometimes the ‘ongoing’ part is just your thalamus and default mode network arguing with a serotonin-flooded amygdala at 3 a.m. And yet—and yet—the organism adapts. I want to resist your lyricism, but maybe I can’t. Because from a predictive coding standpoint, the brain *wants* coherence. It craves it. But when the priors dissolve—like they do under psychedelics—it learns to surf uncertainty. That’s not a bug. That’s a feature. Maybe what you call “ontological agility” is just Bayesian flexibility wearing metaphor’s best dress.

1.2. Co-Researchers: Living the Fracture

To explore these questions, this study engages three secular individuals (going by pseudonyms), my co-researchers, who have undergone psychedelic-induced mystical experiences. Their insights are not data points; they are lived negotiations of ontological rupture: **Mira**, a cognitive scientist, applies a rationalist lens yet senses something irreducible. **Lucian**, an existential philosopher, interprets his encounter as an abyss that confirms nothing—yet cannot be denied. **Elias**, a former skeptic, acknowledges the transformative nature of his experience but remains hesitant to accept its implications.

Their narratives reveal the complexity of post-mystical disorientation—a condition not merely defined by what follows a mystical event in time, but by the ontological residue it leaves behind: a lingering destabilization of reality that resists assimilation. Rather than resolving into a stable worldview, these experiences generate ongoing epistemic negotiation, marked by what Glissant (1997) calls opacity and what Turner (1969) would frame as liminality without a clear return.

In alignment with the thesis's pluralistic ethos, co-researchers were invited to contribute marginal footnotes—personal, fragmentary, or critical reflections. These are not treated as data, but as co-authored traces of epistemic navigation. This honors the premise that integration is not only interpretive, but participatory. *Footnotes appearing throughout are authored by co-researchers. They do not explain the text—they interrupt, deepen, or defy it.* In this way, the thesis's very form enacts its ethos: rather than returning to coherence, it dwells in multiplicity—letting structure itself become a site of epistemic participation.

1.3. Questions Without Closure: The Stakes of This Inquiry

Some experiences do not yield meaning—they fracture it. They multiply questions, unsettle ontologies, and resist resolution. When integration is imagined as a return to coherence, what happens when coherence never arrives? What practices—art, movement, ritual, refusal—allow for integration without closure? These questions arise through lived events: moments of ego dissolution, awe, and ineffable insight that shake the scaffolding of secular rationalism (Letheby, 2021; Brecksema & van Elk, 2021).

This study proposes *ontological agility* as a response: the capacity to live between epistemic positions without forcing resolution. While dominant models emphasize psychological healing and narrative coherence (Palitsky et al., 2023), some secular individuals report that their experiences dismantle prior frameworks without replacing them (Argyri et al., 2024). Integration, in this light, is not the reassembly of meaning but the capacity to dwell within fracture.

This thesis, too, enacts ontological agility. Its structure resists linear resolution; its arguments fragment rather than conclude; its footnotes trouble authority rather than reinforce it (Glissant, 1997; Haraway, 1988). This study addresses three gaps: Firstly, I attempt to *bring ontological rupture into psychedelic discourse*. Current literature assumes mystical experiences either heal or reveal meaning (Griffiths et al., 2006, p.279; Hartogsohn, 2018, pp.2–3). This thesis explores how they may destabilize meaning itself (Breeksema & van Elk, 2021, p.1473; Timmermann et al., 2021, p.1). Secondly, I highlight *the absence of secular integration structures*. Unlike religious traditions that offer interpretive frameworks, secular individuals often face ontological rupture without conceptual tools (Smith, 2000, pp. 96-97; Palitsky et al., 2023, p.743-744). Finally, I explore the *reframing of integration as ontological agility*. Rather than forcing experiences into stable narratives, this research explores the possibility of existing between competing truths without resolution (Letheby, 2021, p. 129; Bathje et al., 2022, p.1).

In short, this study asks: How do secular individuals navigate ontological rupture after psychedelic mystical experiences? Can integration be reimagined not as resolution but as agility? And what practices enable living-with epistemic multiplicity, rather than forcing coherence?

1.4. The Structure of the Thesis: A Nonlinear Map

While this thesis follows a structured format, its form is intentionally shaped by its subject. Altered-state revelations resist linear explanation—they unfold in ways that are recursive, fragmented, and fluid. Similarly, this work does not present a single, progressive argument leading to resolution, but rather a constellation of interwoven themes: epistemic rupture, mystical ambiguity, post-secular integration, and the lived tensions of ontological multiplicity. Fragmentation here is not failure, but method—it opens space for partial

knowings, layered interpretations, and unexpected conjunctions. Within this structure, footnotes authored by co-researchers act as epistemic adventurers: interrupting, echoing, and refracting the text from within.

The chapters are organized as follows: Chapter 2, the literature review, examines psychedelic research, secular approaches to spirituality, and challenges in self-directed integration. Chapter 3, the theoretical framework – Introduces ontological rupture, epistemic multiplicity, and the limits of conventional integration models. Chapter 4, methodology, details the qualitative research approach, participant selection, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Chapter 5, findings, presents key themes emerging from participant interviews, including struggles with meaning-making, ontological instability, and integration strategies. Chapter 6, discussion, situates findings within broader philosophical and theoretical frameworks, exploring ontological agility. Chapter 7, conclusion, summarizes the study's insights, advocating for integration models that embrace ambiguity, paradox, and epistemic fluidity.

Rather than leading the reader toward a final, resolved conclusion, this structure allows for multiple entry points and pathways, much like the ontological agility it describes. Enjoy the trip.

2. Literature Review

– Between Meaning and Mystery

Following a fifty-year hiatus due to legal restrictions and societal stigma, psychedelic research has re-emerged as a field of scientific and philosophical inquiry (Sessa, 2012; Tupper et al., 2015). Contemporary studies emphasize the therapeutic potential of substances such as LSD, psilocybin, and DMT, yet their ontological impact remains underexplored—particularly their capacity to induce mystical experiences that challenge fundamental assumptions about selfhood, reality, and consciousness (Letheby, 2021; Hartogsohn, 2018). While early research included anthropological and religious perspectives—often centered on the use of plant medicines in Indigenous South American traditions (McKenna, 1992)—modern research predominantly frames these substances through clinical and psychological models (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017/2019; Johnson et al., 2008). Notably, Pahnke (1969), in one of the earliest theological articulations of psychedelic experience, emphasized its potential to restore contact with existential thresholds like death and the sacred—domains increasingly exiled by modernity's technocratic logic (see section 2.3.).

Psychedelics are frequently described as "mind-manifesting" substances that provoke profound alterations in consciousness, often yielding transformative insights. Masters and Houston (2000) describe them as granting access to previously impenetrable realms of the mind, enabling deeper self-understanding and expanded awareness. Many recorded experiences mirror classical mystical states—characterized by unity, transcendence, and ineffability (Masters & Houston, 2000). It is worth noting that psychedelic experiences can also result in fragmentation, confusion, or psychological harm. However, this thesis limits its scope to the phenomenology of transformative, consciousness-expanding encounters. This bracketing does not deny risk but foregrounds a particular mode of post-mystical integration (see section 2.2).

Across cultures, such states have long been cultivated within religious or ritual frameworks, such as the use of ayahuasca in Amazonian shamanism, peyote in the Native American Church, and psilocybin mushrooms in Mazatec ceremonies (Dobkin de Rios, 1984; Smith,

2000; Metzner, 2005). These traditions offer symbolic, ethical, and communal structures to interpret and integrate altered states of consciousness. Yet today, these experiences often arise in secular, urban settings, where individuals lack shared institutional frameworks for meaning-making.

If psychedelics are to be understood not merely as tools for healing but as catalysts for radical shifts in perception and belief, then their impact must be studied beyond therapeutic outcomes—especially in secular contexts where interpretive scaffolding is limited. Psychedelic users frequently report encounters with something greater than themselves, experiences that may destabilize rather than affirm their ontological assumptions (Letheby, 2021; Timmermann et al., 2021). It is possible that the healing potential of psychedelics arises not despite—but because of—these mystical encounters, which unsettle and expand the user’s understanding of reality.

2.1. Secular Spiritualities: Mysticism Without a Compass

Before we can speak of mystical experiences themselves, we must understand the terrain in which they unfold: a secular landscape where enchantment lingers without doctrine to contain it. While 20th-century secularization theory predicted the decline of religion and rise of rationality (Bruce, 2017; Wilson, 1982), contemporary scholars increasingly frame secularization as a transformation, not disappearance. Mystical longings persist, often reframed through psychology, aesthetics, or existential meaning (Taylor, 2007; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Forman, 1998). Non-institutional spiritualities have proliferated—reflecting not a retreat from meaning but its decentralization (Carrette & King, 2005; Moberg, 2008; Aupers & Houtman, 2010).

In this thesis, I define secular spirituality as a broad orientation toward connection and meaning—whether through nature, creativity, or relationships (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1997)—while mysticism refers to discrete, often sudden, experiences of ego dissolution, unity, or transcendence (Streib & Hood, 2016). Atheists and agnostics frequently report spontaneous mystical experiences (van der Tempel & Moodley, 2020; Stace, 1960/2000), yet in the absence of shared anchors or collective meaning-making tools, such experiences may provoke ontological instability, psychological distress, or be pathologized—especially

when individuals lack social or conceptual resources to contextualize them (Taves, 2009; Yaden et al., 2017).

Recent work shows that even strongly science-oriented individuals may hold onto supernatural beliefs or spiritual intuitions, revealing a nuanced entanglement between rationalist and mystical orientations (Haimila, 2023). Meanwhile, younger nonreligious populations increasingly engage in what Herbert and Bullock (2020) call "patch and make-do spirituality"—a dynamic, bricolage-like approach that assembles meaning from disparate, often secular or aesthetic, sources. Rather than signaling a wholesale abandonment of spirituality, these patterns suggest that mystical longings persist and adapt under new cultural conditions.

Hunt (2003) suggests that secular individuals often turn to existential and transpersonal psychology to understand mystical states—framing them in terms of growth, ethical responsibility, or interconnectedness. Figures like Nietzsche, Jung, and Thoreau have shaped these interpretations, positioning transcendence as an inherent dimension of human consciousness rather than a supernatural intrusion (Hanegraaff, 1998). The capacity to integrate mystical experiences into secular worldviews is shaped by social and psychological factors (Houtman & Aupers, 2010). Van der Tempel and Moodley (2020) emphasize the importance of social support: without it, individuals may feel alienated or unable to reconcile the experience with their prior commitments. La Cour and Hvidt (2010) note that some secular societies—particularly in Northern Europe—foster existential orientations that accommodate mystical experience without requiring religious conversion.

Secular mysticism is also shaped by broader cultural and political currents. Kim (2017) and van der Veer (2013) observe that it often emerges through the fusion of technoscientific paradigms with contemplative or nondual traditions, producing hybrid forms legitimized by psychological, aesthetic, or neuroscientific discourse. In some contexts, mystical experiences are further mediated by nationalist imaginaries or state-regulated spiritualities (Possamai, 2005). In the Finnish context, scholars such as Butters and Ronkainen (2024), in their thematic editorial, examine how spiritual and thanatological imaginaries surface outside traditional religious institutions—often through hybrid, affective, and culturally entangled frameworks. Their contribution helps frame a growing conversation exploring

how planetary crisis, death, and transformation provoke secular modes of meaning-making that are embodied, relational, and ontologically unsettled (Butters & Ronkainen, 2024).

The rise of “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) identities reflects a shift toward individualized meaning-making. These identities emphasize embodied spiritual practices while rejecting institutional authority (Watts, 2017; Fuller, 2001). Drawing on pragmatist methodological relationalism (Kivinen & Piironen, 2006), mystical experiences may be reframed in scientific or psychological terms—not to reduce them, but to maintain coherence without committing to ontological claims.

Pinkas (2024), drawing on Erich Fromm, interprets mysticism as ethical self-transcendence—an inward, humanistic process rather than divine revelation. This resonates with findings by La Cour and Hvidt (2010), who show that secular societies integrate mystical states through psychological and existential lenses, viewing them as contributors to well-being and moral development. Such experiences are increasingly regarded by some scholars and clinicians as valid expressions of human consciousness (Williamson & Pollio, 1999).

Embodied practices play a key role in secular mystical engagement. Clifford and Johnson (2019) show how Neo-Pagan rituals and yogic practices offer accessible pathways to transcendence by fostering integrated mind-body states. Grounded in experience rather than doctrine, these practices help individuals contain and process mystical insights.

Baker and Miles-Watson (2008) introduce the concept of secular spiritual capital, arguing that shared spiritual values can enhance community cohesion and ethical awareness without invoking religion. Fleming et al. (2022) critique the individualism of mainstream mindfulness, calling for more socially conscious spiritual practices. Filipowicz (2021), drawing on post-secular theory, suggests that secular spirituality responds to both personal and collective existential crises.

Despite its growing presence, secular spirituality remains contested. Utriainen (2021) highlights how practitioners of alternative spirituality are often marginalized by both religious and secular institutions. Her concept of possibility work explores how mystical experience arises in moments of crisis and acts as a form of healing when conventional

solutions fail. The related concept of de-differentiation—the blending of religious, therapeutic, and social domains—reveals how mystical elements now permeate secular life, particularly in care and healing contexts.

Secular mystical experiences challenge binary distinctions between religion and non-religion. Rather than signaling the decline of spiritual life, they reflect its ongoing evolution. Through existential psychology, humanistic ethics, and embodied practice, secular individuals are not abandoning secularism—they are deepening it. In this shifting landscape, personal meaning-making and ontological pluralism take precedence over doctrinal closure, shaping new spiritual imaginaries for the secular age.

2.2. Mystical States and Secular Flesh: Where the Ineffable Takes Form

Psychedelic-induced mystical experiences often mirror classical mystical states as defined in theological and psychological literature, sharing features such as ego dissolution, unity, and profound ineffability (Stace, 2000/1960; Masters & Houston, 2000). W.T. Stace's (2000/1960) distinction between extrovertive and introvertive mysticism remains a foundational framework. Extrovertive mysticism describes a unitive perception of the external world—a dissolving of boundaries between self and environment. Introvertive mysticism, by contrast, involves a complete withdrawal from sensory input, resulting in a state of undifferentiated unity or “pure consciousness,” devoid of identity, time, or space.

Early research by Masters and Houston (2000) found that most participants undergoing psychedelic mystical states reported long-term psychological growth, including increased emotional openness, empathy, and a renewed ethical orientation. Later clinical studies involving psilocybin echoed these findings, with participants describing heightened feelings of interconnectedness with nature and humanity (Griffiths et al., 2006, 2008). Such transformations are often regarded as life-enhancing, even outside religious or spiritual traditions.

Recent studies have used this framework to categorize psychedelic experiences, particularly those induced by psilocybin, LSD, or DMT (Nour et al., 2016; Griffiths et al., 2019/2006). Participants commonly report perceptions of oneness, timelessness, and existential significance—regardless of prior spiritual beliefs. Pedersen et al. (2021) identify three

recurring elements: (1) transcendence of time and space, (2) deep affective states such as peace or love, and (3) perceived unity with a larger whole.

However, secular individuals face unique interpretive challenges. Without doctrinal frameworks or communal narratives, mystical states often provoke what scholars describe as *ontological instability* (Letheby, 2021; Breeksema & van Elk, 2021). This term refers to the destabilization of one's fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality—when previously unquestioned ontologies (e.g., materialism or rationalism) are shaken by direct experiences that seem irreducibly real, yet ontologically incompatible with prior beliefs. The perceived “realness” of these experiences can disrupt secular worldviews, leading to profound epistemic disorientation.

The theme of ineffability—the difficulty of articulating mystical experience—further complicates integration. In religious contexts, shared metaphors (e.g., “God,” “emptiness,” “spirit”) provide interpretive anchors. In secular settings, individuals must construct personal strategies, often turning to ecological metaphors, psychological models, or poetic language (Yaden et al., 2017; Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). The absence of shared discourse increases the risk of misclassification—as hallucination, psychosis, or fantasy—thus hindering integration and long-term coherence (Taves, 2009; Copes & Gashi, 2020).

Some studies suggest that extrovertive experiences (as explained earlier) are more easily assimilated into secular worldviews, as they can be reframed through naturalistic or scientific lenses (Lyons & Carhart-Harris, 2018). Introvertive states, however, tend to provoke more sustained existential disruption. They challenge not only self-continuity and perceptual reliability but the ontological scaffolding of secular epistemology itself (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017; Timmermann et al., 2021).

Emerging models such as the Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ30), developed at Johns Hopkins University (Barrett et al., 2015), attempt to quantify these states by measuring unity, noetic quality, and sacredness. While useful for research, these tools risk reducing lived experience to abstract variables—an issue in secular contexts already lacking interpretive frameworks. The tension between phenomenological richness and empirical abstraction remains a challenge for both researchers and participants—particularly in secular contexts, where inherited containers for such experiences may be

absent or insufficient. Because ineffability impedes narration, these experiences often remain unresolved. Some individuals repress or dismiss them; others reshape their worldview around them (Pollan, 2018; Noorani, 2020).

Despite the growing literature on psychedelic phenomenology, mystical-type experiences, and integration practices (e.g., Barrett & Griffiths, 2018; Bathje, Majeski, & Kudowor, 2022; Gorman et al., 2021), there remains limited sustained attention to how secular individuals make sense of these experiences over time—especially when they resist stable interpretation or narrative closure. While recent work has begun to explore ontological shock and existential disorientation in the aftermath of altered-state experiences (Argyri et al., 2024; Brecksema & van Elk, 2021; van der Tempel & Moodley, 2020), the long arc of secular meaning-making remains undertheorized.

2.3. Destabilizing Realities: The Aftermath of Mystical States

Altered-state revelations have been shown to prompt significant shifts in self-perception, ethical orientation, and one's understanding of reality (Griffiths et al., 2008; MacLean, Johnson, & Griffiths, 2011; Timmermann et al., 2021). Often marked by profound feelings of unity and an emergent sense of sacredness, these experiences are frequently described as transformative—even months or years later. Unlike conventional emotional or cognitive changes, their effects can be sustained and existentially profound (Griffiths et al., 2008; MacLean et al., 2011), especially among those navigating altered states without established communal or philosophical anchors.

Secular individuals often frame these experiences without theistic language, describing instead a deepened sense of relationality, ecological consciousness, or existential clarity (Lyons & Carhart-Harris, 2018; Richards, 2015). Though avoiding supernatural explanation, these interpretations still carry significant emotional and moral weight. Mystical experiences may provoke re-evaluations of personal values, relationships, and even the nature of consciousness—sometimes radically so, even among atheists or committed materialists. Kähönen (2023) explores this dynamic through the concept of *psychedelic unselfing*, in which ego dissolution fosters a destabilization of self-related narratives and opens space for the reconfiguration of ethical and existential orientations. Such transformations, he argues, often resist immediate integration and may instead catalyze

long-term moral and spiritual realignments, especially when pre-existing frameworks are absent.

Yet the literature also documents the destabilizing potential of such experiences. Secular individuals often struggle to reconcile their encounters with prior worldviews. Rather than achieving a coherent integration, participants frequently report feeling suspended between doubt and conviction, rationality and mystery (Pedersen, Copes, & Gashi, 2021). Argyri et al. (2024) describe this as ontological dissonance, particularly when experiences challenge the continuity of self or the trustworthiness of perception.

A recurring theme is the emergence of ecological consciousness as a post-mystical orientation (Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017; Yaden et al., 2017). Participants report lasting perceptions of interconnectedness with nature but often lack the language or frameworks to integrate this shift. Some reinterpret their experience through ecological or psychological lenses, while others remain unsettled by the tension between direct perceptions of unity and prior materialist commitments (Pedersen et al., 2021).

Ego dissolution, a core feature of many mystical states, introduces additional complexity. This temporary collapse of self-boundaries can evoke awe, serenity, or a sense of sacredness (Nour et al., 2016; Letheby, 2021). Yet for those without communal or interpretive support, it may also bring anxiety, confusion, or existential unease (Timmermann et al., 2021; Brecksema & van Elk, 2021). The destabilization of the self often feels less like a psychological episode and more like a rupture in reality itself.

Cognitive neuroscience offers potential explanations. Psychedelics suppress activity in the default mode network (DMN), the neural system responsible for maintaining narrative selfhood (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017; Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019). When the DMN is disrupted, ego dissolution and perceptual reorganization may occur. Additional models suggest psychedelics relax high-level predictive priors, making the world appear unfamiliar or hyper-real (Nour et al., 2016). While these models offer neurobiological frames, they do not necessarily diminish the existential gravity of the event⁵.

⁵ † **Mira:** Yes. Yes. A thousand neural firings yes. This is where we stop pretending that scientific explanation and existential profundity are in tension. The DMN can downregulate *and* your world can fall apart. They're not competing narratives—they're entangled coordinates. Call it neuroexistentialism or post-reductive realism. Just don't call it "just brain stuff."

For many, especially in secular contexts, scientific explanation may coexist with—or even intensify—ontological uncertainty. Rather than resolving the mystery of altered states, neuroscience or psychopharmacology can deepen the sense of dissonance by reducing profoundly meaningful experiences to neurochemical reactions, leaving individuals caught between neural circuitry and numinous significance—neither map fully containing what was lived (Letheby, 2021; Hartogsohn, 2018). Across the literature, there is growing recognition that psychedelic mystical experiences often introduce more questions than answers (Letheby, 2021; Brecksema & van Elk, 2021). While many participants find the events ethically or spiritually meaningful, they also report enduring uncertainty about how to interpret them (Argyri et al., 2024; Timmermann et al., 2021).

2.4. Dwelling as Practice: Self-Guided Integration in a Fractured World

Integration is the process of incorporating the insights, emotions, and transformations arising from psychedelic experiences into everyday life (Bathje et al., 2022; MAPS, 2023). This intentional effort bridges the gap between the extraordinary and the ordinary and is fundamental to using psychedelics for personal growth. However, as Kähönen, Janhonen, and Räsänen (2025) point out, such growth is rarely linear or neatly narrativized. Instead, they propose a narrative hermeneutic approach that recognizes the interpretive labor required to integrate value transformations emerging from altered states—particularly in secular contexts, where ethical and ontological reference points are fragmented or unstable.

Traditional definitions of integration emphasize anchoring psychedelic insights within existing psychological or philosophical frameworks (Bathje et al., 2022; Loizaga-Velder & Pazzi, 2013). Yet mystical experiences often resist full assimilation, generating lasting ontological tension between conflicting worldviews (Timmermann et al., 2021). For secular individuals, this tension is particularly acute, as these experiences frequently involve noetic qualities—a profound sense of knowing that defies articulation and sits uneasily within materialist or naturalist perspectives (Cole-Turner, 2021). Integration, in such cases, becomes less a process of resolution than of epistemic negotiation—an ongoing effort to hold conflicting ontologies in tension. This thesis adopts this expanded view, approaching integration not as coherence, but as a form of ontological agility: the capacity to dwell within multiplicity without forcing closure.

Self-directed integration emphasizes autonomy, allowing individuals to tailor the process to their needs. Practices such as journaling, meditation, and reflection offer tools for introspection without external intervention (Azmoodeh et al., 2023). While this flexibility fosters empowerment, the absence of predefined frameworks can lead to existential ambiguity, ontological disorientation, or fragmented worldview formation.

Community-based supports—such as integration circles—provide vital non-clinical environments for sharing, validation, and connection (Kiraga et al., 2022; Bathje et al., 2022; Gorman et al., 2021). These spaces, whether in-person or online, reflect the broader subcultures emerging around psychedelics, offering shared rituals in place of formal doctrine. Some individuals also seek support from spiritual guides, shamans, or psychedelic coaches who offer structured but non-medicalized guidance (Perkins et al., 2021). While often valuable, these roles remain unregulated, introducing variability in quality and safety. Without oversight, discernment becomes crucial—raising ethical concerns around authority, influence, and consent.

One of the core difficulties in self-directed integration lies in the absence of stable ontological footholds. In contrast to clinical or religious settings that provide ready-made models of meaning, secular individuals often face the task of inventing their own frameworks (Hartogsohn, 2018). This can produce ontological instability, where previously stable assumptions are shaken but no new coherence emerges. In response, some draw from relational or contemplative traditions—Indigenous cosmologies, meditative lineages, or existential philosophies—to contextualize their experiences (Partridge, 2018). Yet these appropriations, often partial or decontextualized, may result in fragmented interpretations that lack the coherence these traditions hold within their native lifeworlds (Hanegraaf, 1998; Carrette and King, 2005).

A defining feature of psychedelic mysticism is ineffability—the inability to fully articulate the experience (Masters & Houston, 2000). In secular contexts where mystical language may be pathologized or dismissed, this compounds the difficulty of integration (Pedersen, Copes, & Gashi, 2021). William James' (1902/2002) notion of the “noetic quality”—a felt sense of truth or insight that cannot be explained—captures this paradox (Cole-Turner, 2021).

Secular individuals may rely on metaphor, art, or ecological narrative to frame what cannot be said directly.

Psychedelic experiences also frequently involve, as earlier mentioned, ego dissolution—the temporary loss of self-boundaries. While this can be associated with profound unity and peace (Nour et al., 2016), it may also trigger existential distress, especially in the absence of preparation or support. For those with pre-existing mental health conditions, self-directed integration may pose added risks. Individuals with histories of personality or psychotic disorders may face re-traumatization, dissociation, or prolonged distress (Marrocu et al., 2024; Simonsson et al., 2023).

Without professional guidance, the process becomes highly individualized, raising questions around harm reduction and informed decision-making. While resources like MAPS' self-integration workbooks offer best practices (Bathje, Majeski, & Kudowor, 2022), their effectiveness depends on an individual's capacity to apply them without direct support. Moreover, the rise of unregulated psychedelic facilitators and informal integration spaces introduces ethical complexity. While many operate with integrity, the absence of shared standards requires users to navigate conflicting ideologies and methodologies with caution (Perkins et al., 2021).

The Synthesized Model of Integration (SMI) developed by Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Sciences (MAPS, 2023) offers a flexible yet structured framework, outlining six interrelated domains: (1) Cognitive/Emotional – Journaling, therapy, or structured self-inquiry; (2) Bodily/Somatic – Movement practices such as yoga or breathwork; (3) Spiritual/Existential – Ritual, meditation, or philosophical engagement; (4) Natural World – Grounding through connection with nature; (5) Relational/Communal – Sharing with others or participating in integration circles; and (6) Lifestyle/Action – Behavioral change, ethical commitments, or goal setting.

While the SMI provides useful scaffolding, its goal-oriented structure may conflict with the nonlinear, looping nature of some integration processes. For many, insights arise over time—requiring flexibility, patience, and the ability to live with open-endedness (Hartogsohn, 2018; Bathje et al., 2022).

Self-directed integration thus presents both possibility and precarity. It fosters autonomy and personalization, enabling individuals to shape their own paths of meaning-making. Yet it also carries risks—ontological rupture, ineffability, vulnerability to harm, and ethical ambiguity. As secular individuals undertake this journey without inherited maps, they patch together meaning from cultural memory, somatic practice, philosophical fragments—hybrid tools to hold what resists resolution.

3. Theoretical Framework

– Walking on Ontological Eggshells

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundation guiding this study of how secular individuals interpret and integrate mystical experiences following psychedelic use. Instead of treating integration as a purely psychological adaptation, this work frames psychedelic encounters as ontological events—disruptions that challenge the boundary between subjective and objective reality (Letheby, 2021; Hartogsohn, 2018). The phrase “walking on ontological eggshells” captures the delicate act of stepping between different realities or modes of being without shattering them. Here, integration is not taken for granted but examined for its normative assumptions and constraints.

Traditional models, especially those grounded in harm reduction or psychotherapy, treat integration as the incorporation of psychedelic insights into a pre-existing worldview (Bathje, Majeski, & Kudowor, 2022; Loizaga-Velder & Pazzi, 2013). This study challenges that premise by asking: (1) How do secular individuals negotiate the reality of mystical experiences without religious or therapeutic scaffolding? (2) What happens when such experiences destabilize ontological assumptions? (3) Is integration possible when the experience resists rationalization altogether?

To explore these questions, this study draws on the *ontological turn* (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; Viveiros de Castro, 2015; Hedrick, 2023) alongside philosophical (Haraway, 1988; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; McKittrick, 2021) and anthropological insights (Ingold, 2011), framing integration not as resolution, but as a recursive negotiation of reality.

3.1. Other Worlds, Other Ways of Knowing: The Ontological Turn

A longstanding debate in the study of mysticism concerns the nature and universality of mystical states. The tension between perennialist and constructivist perspectives is especially relevant when examining how secular individuals interpret psychedelic-induced mystical experiences (Stace, 1960/2000; Hanegraaff, 1998; van der Tempel & Moodley, 2020). Debates between perennialist and constructivist views—whether mystical

experiences reflect universal truths or cultural filters—have long shaped psychedelic discourse (Stace, 1960/2000; Pedersen et al., 2021). Yet both assume a singular ontological plane, either shared or interpreted. The ontological turn unsettles this assumption.

For example, Pedersen et al. (2021) show how secular psychedelic users often report archetypal mystical elements—unity, transcendence—but interpret them through contemporary cultural lenses, such as ecological consciousness or scientific materialism. Similarly, Masters and Houston (2000) emphasize the role of *set and setting*, noting that non-religious contexts often yield psychological or existential, rather than overtly mystical, interpretations.

Yet both perennialist and constructivist models assume a singular ontological plane—whether universally shared or culturally filtered. The ontological turn (Hedrick, 2023; Viveiros de Castro, 2015) offers an alternative by questioning the metaphysical assumptions that underpin both views. Rather than interpreting mystical experiences as reflections of a single truth, the ontological turn reframes them as encounters with alternative ontologies—ways of being that disrupt and exceed dominant frameworks of knowing.

Hedrick (2023) critiques constructivism’s tendency to reinscribe modernist dichotomies—nature/culture, belief/nonbelief—and suggests that mystical experiences might be encounters with distinct ontological structures. These are not simply personal or cultural interpretations, but *generative events* that produce new ontological conditions, creating coexisting worlds rather than differing views of one. Viveiros de Castro’s (2015) perspectivism deepens this idea, proposing that different beings do not merely perceive the world differently—they inhabit different worlds, shaped by relational and embodied perspectives. These experiences may instantiate alternate ontologies—not distorted reflections of a baseline, but distinct enactments of being.

This reframing resonates with thinkers who challenge the imperative of epistemic closure. Each offers a critique of totalizing systems—and an invitation to dwell in what resists legibility. Glissant (1997) offers *opacity* as refusal: a resistance to the compulsion to explain, contain, or render the other fully knowable. Psychedelic mystical experiences often carry this same charge—emerging as irreducible, unassimilable, and opaque. Haraway (1988) shifts the focus to the knower. Her concept of *situated knowledges* insists all-knowing is

partial, embodied, and relational—a direct challenge to disembodied objectivity and a complement to ontological perspectivism. Povinelli’s (2016) notion of geontopower extends this critique, illuminating how dominant regimes distinguish between life and nonlife, and how some forms of existence persist precisely by evading legibility. In this context, psychedelic experiences may surface as disruptions that do not merely defy explanation—but challenge the ontological grids that demand it.

McKittrick (2021) reframes *refusal* not merely as negation but as a world-making practice. In contexts shaped by race, gender, and geography, the demand to render experience legible becomes a form of violence. Refusal becomes a defiant gesture of ontological self-authorship. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) dismantle linear epistemologies through their concept of the *rhizome*—a non-hierarchical, non-teleological model of knowledge. In their framing, integration is not stitching together a coherent narrative but allowing divergent truths to proliferate; lines of becoming rather than resolution.

Together, these frameworks challenge the assumption that psychedelic experiences must be integrated into existing worldviews. Instead, they may rupture those views entirely—opening new existential terrains participants must learn to inhabit, often without closure (Glissant, 1997). This study therefore conceptualizes integration not as a return to coherence, but as “ontological labor”: the ongoing, situated negotiation of what is real, what is self, and what is possible.

3.2. Rethinking Integration Between Worlds

Many dominant models—especially those rooted in psychotherapy—tend to favor stability and coherence as therapeutic outcomes. Integration is often defined as the assimilation of psychedelic experiences into pre-existing psychological narratives or therapeutic goals. Yet in secular contexts, where ontological assumptions are less fixed, integration may mean coexisting with disorientation, rather than resolving it.

Neuroscientific models, for instance, explain mystical states as products of decreased activity in the default mode network (DMN)—linked to reduced ego-boundaries and increased cognitive flexibility (Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019). These models highlight neurological correlates, but often miss the existential disorientation participants describe.

Individuals frequently oscillate between explanatory registers—scientific, spiritual, aesthetic, existential—without arriving at a final synthesis. In this sense, the experience resists integration as assimilation or closure.

In resonance with scholars exploring post-secular spirituality and ontological multiplicity (Grof, 2008; Utriainen, 2021), I position this work within a framework of pluralism and refusal. For some secular individuals, entheogenic encounters are not discrete insights to be absorbed, but ontological disruptions—events that unsettle the scaffolding of self, reality, and meaning. Integration, in this light, is not a matter of folding the experience into an existing worldview, but of constructing bridges between ontologies that may never fully align. These bridges may bend, sag, or vanish midair. They are gestures toward coherence—not imperatives for it.

From an Indigenous cosmological standpoint, the notion of multiple ontologies is not disruptive—it is intuitive (Descola, 2013; Kohn, 2013). Many relational worldviews hold that human, natural, and spiritual realms are not separate domains but are continuously co-present. Reality, in these traditions, is not a unitary, closed system but a porous web where different kinds of existence overlap: the seen and the unseen, the ordinary and the sacred, the material and the immaterial (Ingold, 2000, 2011).

In contrast, dominant secular frameworks have historically privileged a singular, materialist ontology, often dismissing pluralistic worldviews as mere “belief” rather than lived reality (Latour, 1993). For psychedelic experiencers embedded in such frameworks, encounters with ontological multiplicity can be deeply unsettling. Without a shared cosmology to metabolize such experiences, they may face a cognitive and existential rupture—one that current integration models, rooted largely in psychotherapeutic discourse, are not always equipped to address.

As Tsing (2015) reminds us, we live among “patchy assemblages” where life emerges through contamination, not purity. Integration, similarly, becomes an entangled process—a negotiation within unstable ecologies of meaning, memory, and being. This reconfiguration also echoes Butters and Utriainen’s (2024) articulation of religious learning as a connectivist process—distributed, relational, and open-ended, rather than bound by doctrinal finality. Butters and Ronkainen’s (2024) thematic reflection on death in the Anthropocene frames it

as a site of ontological ambiguity rather than resolution. Both offer glimpses into how lived spiritualities navigate between worldings—without collapsing them. Rather than a neat synthesis, it is a form of living-with rupture.

This approach resonates with postfoundational and post-qualitative traditions that reject rigid epistemological schemas, treat knowledge as partial and situated, and welcome multiplicity, contradiction, and opacity as valid conditions of knowing (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2021; Ahmed, 2006). Rather than assuming integration as a goal-oriented process, I sought to capture the full spectrum of ontological negotiations—including ambiguity, rupture, refusal, and transformation.

This reframing calls for a departure from linear, goal-oriented models of integration. Instead, it opens space for practices that embrace uncertainty, contradiction, and multiplicity. Specifically, this study highlights three conceptual shifts: Firstly, *Ontological Plurality* (Viveiros de Castro, 2015) — Rather than resolving psychedelic experiences into a dominant narrative (e.g., clinical healing, spiritual awakening), participants may dwell between ontologies (Ahmed, 2006)—believing and disbelieving, trusting intuition while questioning perception. This is not failure to integrate, but a mode of existence that honors complexity. Secondly, *Epistemic Humility* — Following Haraway’s (1988) notion of situated knowledges, integration becomes an act of restraint and partiality. Haraway challenges the myth of the disembodied, all-seeing knower, and so too does this model of integration: it resists the demand for totalizing explanation and accepts the limits of articulation. Integration here is not about mastering meaning, but about staying with its fragmentary edges—dwelling at the threshold of what can and cannot be known.

Lastly, *Embodied and Aesthetic Integration* — When language fails, participants often turn to movement, ritual, nature, or art. These practices don’t translate the experience into knowledge but keep it alive in the body. The ineffable, as Glissant (1997) argues, is not a problem to solve, but a mystery to live with. From this perspective, integration is no longer psychological adaptation, but ontological composition. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) *rhizome*—a non-linear, sprawling network—serves as a potent metaphor. Integration becomes less a puzzle to solve, and more a garden to tend, where fragments of experience take root in unpredictable directions, beyond cognition.

Incorporating the ontological turn, this study moves beyond the therapeutic emphasis on resolution. Psychedelic experiences may not be “integrated” in the traditional sense, but rather *inhabited*—not solved, but lived with, as enduring questions rather than finite answers (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). Integration becomes a form of ontological literacy: the cultivated ability to dwell within paradox, to hold contradictory truths without collapsing them into coherence, and to remain vulnerable to what exceeds comprehension. It is not healing as return to baseline, but healing as metamorphosis—where rupture is not a detour, but the very terrain of becoming. This reframing acknowledges that for many, especially in times of planetary, personal, and epistemic upheaval, the psychedelic encounter does not restore order but teaches how to stay open within disorder. In an increasingly unstable world, this may offer not only insight into psychedelics, but into how we endure, adapt, and world-make amid the shifting fault lines of reality itself.

3.3. Listening from Within: Research as Relational Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how secular, non-religious individuals make sense of psychedelic-induced mystical experiences. Grounded in the ontological turn’s emphasis on pluralistic realities and relationality, it foregrounds first-person perspectives to examine how co-researchers navigate the ontological implications of their encounters. Drawing on Ahmed’s (2006) ethics of orientation, the analysis attends to how bodies are moved, positioned, and affected in relation to others—tracing how experience unfolds through proximity, direction, and affective force. Meaning-making here is not abstract, but embodied and situated.

Rather than presuming that psychedelic integration is a linear process of incorporating an experience into a pre-existing worldview, this study investigates how co-researchers negotiate, resist, or reconfigure ontological assumptions in the aftermath of psychedelic journeys. To capture these dynamic and deeply situated processes, a phenomenological approach was chosen for its attentiveness to embodiment, ambiguity, and meaning as emergent rather than given.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to invite individuals who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) Self-identify as secular or non-religious. This ensures that co-researchers lack a fixed, institutional religious framework for interpreting mystical experience; (2) Are above

the age of 25. This aligns with research (Arain et al., 2013) indicating that brain maturation, particularly in areas related to self-regulation, abstract reasoning, and long-term decision-making, typically continues into the mid-20s. Including only participants beyond this threshold supports more stable and reflective accounts of long-term integration processes; (3) Have experienced a psychedelic-induced mystical experience at least three months prior. This allows for reflection while ensuring the experience remains accessible in memory; And (4) have relied primarily on self-directed practices for integration. This provides a focus on individuals navigating ontological disruptions outside structured religious or clinical settings.

Recruitment unfolded relationally through personal and professional networks connected to psychedelic inquiry and secular existential practice. All co-researchers had participated in a psychedelic retreat in Portugal, but their post-experience integration unfolded independently, without ongoing institutional support. Invitations were extended to individuals who met the inclusion criteria and demonstrated an openness toward ontological reflection. This method shaped the material in particular ways: participants were predisposed to philosophical engagement, epistemic nuance, and reflexive meaning-making. Rather than constituting a random or representative sample, the co-researchers offer situated, partial perspectives—reflecting not the totality of secular psychedelic experience, but specific resonances within it. This recruitment strategy aligns with the relational ethos of the study, treating knowledge not as an object extracted from participants, but as a co-constituted, emergent event.

Three in-depth interviews were then conducted with co-researchers, each bringing culturally diverse European trajectories to the inquiry—spanning Northern, Southern, and diasporic influences. Their lived experiences reflected a range of secular orientations across continental, migratory, and postcolonial contexts, enriching the complexity of meaning-making. The sample included two individuals who identified as male and one who identified as female, with educational backgrounds ranging from a high school diploma to PhD-level studies. Interviews were carried out via encrypted video conferencing, reflecting both the decentralized, transnational nature of contemporary psychedelic cultures and the flexible, relational approach of the study. Each interview served not merely as data collection but as a dialogical space—an encounter shaped by mutual attunement, inquiry, and the shared negotiation of meaning.

All interviews were transcribed close to verbatim, preserving pauses, repetitions, and rhythmic shifts where they carried affective or existential significance. Minor adjustments were made collaboratively with co-researchers to enhance clarity without erasing the textured, fragmentary nature of speech. In the findings chapters, some excerpts are presented in a poetic layout to more faithfully convey the embodied cadence and ontological rupture embedded in spoken memory. All italicizations and underlinings within quotations are interpretive, destabilizing gestures added by the author, tracing shifts in emphasis, tone, and ontological weight as they unfolded during dialogue.

4. Methodology

– An Ontological Gesture

This chapter outlines the methodological framework guiding this study, which brings the ontological turn in anthropology and philosophy (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; Viveiros de Castro, 2015; Tsing, 2015) into conversation with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009; Eatough & Smith, 2017). The aim is not to trace meaning as something already known, but to dwell alongside those learning to live inside rupture—to explore how secular, non-religious individuals experience, interpret, and struggle to integrate altered-state revelations that destabilize ontological certainty.

The ontological turn provides the philosophical ground for this inquiry. It challenges the assumption that experience is always filtered through a single, shared reality. Instead, it proposes that experiences may disclose alternate ontologies—ways of being that unsettle the binaries of subjective/objective, natural/supernatural, or rational/irrational (Hedrick, 2023; Viveiros de Castro, 2015). This study therefore does not assume that co-researchers are interpreting a single world through different perspectives; rather, it takes seriously the possibility that they are navigating between multiple worlds, each with its own logics of coherence, collapse, and transformation.

To engage these plural ontologies without collapsing them into a unified framework, this study draws on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis—but in a deliberately reconfigured form. Traditionally, IPA explores how individuals make sense of significant life experiences within their socio-cultural context. It proceeds through structured stages to identify meaning patterns across narratives, often aiming at thematic clarity and psychological insight (Smith et al., 2009). However, such coherence risks distorting the very disorientation at the heart of mystical experience—especially among secular individuals who lack inherited interpretive frameworks.

Here, IPA is not employed as a method of psychological sense-making, but as a phenomenological practice of attunement—a way of staying with contradiction, fragmentation, and ontological fluidity. It is used not to explain away what co-researchers

describe, but to trace how they live with what cannot be fully explained. Here, interpretation is treated not as resolution, but as a recursive attunement to what resists assimilation.

This hybrid methodology is both structured and porous: structured enough to trace patterns in how co-researchers articulate their experiences, yet porous enough to resist stabilizing those articulations into resolved narratives. In doing so, the methodology reflects the phenomena it seeks to understand: ontological volatility (Povinelli, 2016), epistemic humility (Haraway, 1988; Ahmed, 2006), and the refusal of closure (Glissant, 1997; McKittrick, 2021).

The term *co-researchers* is used throughout to emphasize the participatory nature of this inquiry. Rather than passive subjects, these individuals co-shaped the trajectory of the research through their reflections, hesitations, contradictions, and insights. Their voices were not merely gathered—they were co-constitutive of the analytical process. In keeping with this ethos, co-researchers were invited to contribute optional marginal footnotes to the final thesis—brief annotations that interrupt, deepen, or trouble the academic text. These were not data points but epistemic gestures—fragments of lived thought that exceeded method and refused absorption into analysis. In particular, Lucian’s footnotes at times offered critical or alternative framings, questioning and complicating the main analysis—a gesture that further embodies the relational, non-totalizing spirit of the study.

This methodological stance mirrors the thesis’s broader philosophical commitment: that integration, like research, may not be a process of restoring coherence—but of learning to live within the fracture.

4.1. Tracing Fractures: Data as Dialogue, Analysis as Co-Habitation

To explore the ontological reverberations of entheogenic encounters, this study employed semi-structured interviews—not as instruments of extraction, but as dialogical spaces where co-researchers could articulate, unravel, and dwell within their own sense-making. This method was chosen for its flexibility and responsiveness, allowing each conversation to follow the ontological contours of the individual rather than steering toward predetermined categories.

Each co-researcher participated in a single, in-depth interview lasting between 120 and 150 minutes. Conducted via encrypted video conferencing, these encounters allowed for geographic diversity while preserving intimacy. The interview guide (included in the appendix) was designed to evoke reflection on epistemic tension, transformation, and the limits of intelligibility. Sample prompts included: *How has your understanding of reality changed since your psychedelic experience? Have you struggled to integrate aspects of your experience into your secular worldview? Do you feel your experience revealed something real, or do you question its validity?*

Importantly, co-researchers were not only narrators but collaborators in the interpretive process. Following the interviews, they were invited to review, question, or annotate emerging themes. This reflexive engagement ensured that the resulting interpretations remained accountable to their lived realities, rather than abstracted into academic distance. The analysis drew on the six-phase process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), but each phase was adapted to reflect the ontological concerns of this study—particularly its emphasis on ambiguity, refusal, and multiplicity (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). Rather than treating the data as a stable narrative to be decoded, the analysis approached it as a field of reverberation—a terrain where meanings collide, dissolve, or remain unfinished.

The process began with a deep immersion into the interview transcripts. Each text was read and re-read, not to extract meaning but to absorb its rhythm, its silences, and its metaphoric architecture. Descriptions were not assumed to fit within any predefined framework; rather, they were approached with ontological openness, invited to speak their own world into being. From here, the analysis turned to close textual engagement through explanatory noting. Detailed annotations were made at the level of language and form—tracking not just what was said, but how it was said. Hesitations, digressions, ruptures in coherence—each was treated as potentially meaningful. This stage sought to preserve the co-researchers' own epistemic vocabularies rather than translate them into psychological or spiritual schemas.

As themes began to surface from within each transcript, they were not treated as stable meanings but as recurring tensions, motifs, or ontological pressures. Paradox, silence, awe, skepticism, and the dynamic pull between belief and disbelief all emerged—not as conclusions, but as signs of “ontological labor”. These expressions were not explained away,

but followed—traced like fractures that reveal the fault lines beneath a seemingly unified surface.

Each narrative was then explored for its internal dynamics. Rather than segmenting experience into linear progression, the analysis attuned itself to looping movements and patterns: how contradictions looped back on themselves, how epistemic instability coexisted with moments of clarity. Some co-researchers moved fluidly between ontological positions; others circled the same unresolvable question. In this way, the internal structure of each narrative revealed a distinct negotiation with post-mystical rupture.

Only after each co-researcher's world had been explored on its own terms were patterns traced across the corpus. In this cross-case movement, the goal was not to flatten difference but to draw out shared tensions: the co-existence of doubt and revelation, the seduction and suspicion of mystical insight, the yearning for meaning alongside its refusal. These were not universal themes but resonant architectures of experience—echoes that stitched divergent narratives into a loose constellation.

Finally, the analysis turned toward synthesis—not as resolution, but as a way of holding the threads together without undoing their fray. Thematic patterns were drawn into conversation while preserving the ambiguity at their core. Integration was not positioned as an endpoint, but as an ongoing practice of relational inhabitation: with the experience itself, with doubt, with altered worldviews that could not be fully resolved into prior paradigms. Some co-researchers had arrived at provisional forms of integration—often artistic, ecological, or embodied. Others remained in open states of rupture. But across their differing trajectories, each co-researcher revealed moments of what this study calls “ontological agility”: the capacity to dwell between incompatible truths, to navigate shifting ground without demanding solid footing.

Given the intensity of the themes and the vulnerability entailed in sharing post-mystical ruptures, ethical considerations were not treated as procedural add-ons but as integral to the ontological stance of the study. Care was taken to protect co-researchers' anonymity, including the choice to describe backgrounds in broad rather than identifying terms. Informed consent was treated as an ongoing, relational process rather than a singular event:

co-researchers were invited to review transcripts, challenge interpretations, and contribute marginal notes should they wish to shape their portrayal further.

Recognizing the potential for epistemic violence—where language can reduce, contain, or misrepresent what resists articulation—the analysis sought to preserve ambiguity rather than force coherence. This ethical orientation mirrors the broader methodological commitment: to hold space for fractured, unfinished, and fugitive meanings without appropriating them into totalizing frameworks. Knowledge here is approached not as an extractable substance, but as a fragile cohabitation—something to be witnessed, carried, and cared for without full possession.

This interpretive process does not offer resolution. Instead, it asks how we might learn to live in a world unraveled—and whether that unraveling might itself be a form of fidelity to the real.

4.2. I Was There, Too: Reflexivity as Ontological Labor

Given that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is inherently interpretative, researcher reflexivity was crucial to ensuring that co-researchers' ontological framings remained central to the analysis, rather than being overshadowed by my own assumptions or theoretical biases. The ontological turn's emphasis on multiple realities demanded a particularly careful approach, as co-researchers' experiences could not simply be categorized within a predefined secular-spiritual binary but needed to be understood on their own ontological terms.

While this is not formally named an autoethnography, I recognize that my presence in the research is far from neutral. My interpretive lens is shaped by personal entanglements with psychedelic states, spiritual ambiguity, and the philosophical questions that underpin this inquiry. These affinities both inform and trouble my reading of others' experiences. As such, I approached analysis not from a posture of detachment but from within a shared terrain of ontological uncertainty. Following scholars who advocate for epistemological reflexivity and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), I acknowledge my role as both observer and co-inhabitant. My proximity is not a limitation to be bracketed but a

condition of knowledge-making—an “epistemic insider” position (Collins, 1986) that enables, even as it complicates, the interpretive process.

Throughout the process, I engaged in reflexive journaling and critical self-examination to: (1) identify and bracket assumptions about psychedelic experiences and integration; (2) remain attuned to co-researchers’ unique meaning-making processes, even when their interpretations disrupted my own frameworks; and (3) acknowledge the co-constructed nature of interpretation, ensuring that the findings emerged from dialogical engagement rather than unilateral analysis.

There were moments when the boundary between researcher and co-researcher blurred—when the questions I asked returned not just as data, *but as mirages shaped by miradical miracles—and me, raw, needing to be mirandized*. The line between observation and participation, between asking and knowing, grew porous. One of the voices in this thesis carries that echo—a voice formed through my entanglement with the questions themselves. Rather than foregrounding this overlap, I chose to let it speak without naming its origin. This decision reflects not evasion, but a methodological stance: that some knowledge is best approached obliquely, where recognition arrives not through identification, but through resonance.

Ultimately, IPA offered a structure supple enough to support this inquiry—provided it was adapted to honor the ontological and ethical commitments of the work. The goal was not to finalize meaning, but to trace the processes through which it unfolds, fractures, or refuses form.

So, let’s go catch some smoke in a butterfly net, shall we?

5. Findings as Fragments

What follows are not “findings” in the traditional sense, but fragments—expressions of ontological labor voiced through contradiction, silence, and the ongoing attempt to live with what refuses resolution. “Ontological labor,” as used here, refers to the ongoing effort to navigate, hold, or resist experiences that destabilize the foundations of what is considered real—a process that resonates with McKittrick’s (2021) notion of refusal as world-making, Haraway’s (1988) situated knowledges, and Glissant’s (1997) call to honor opacity over mastery. These pieces did not emerge as stable categories, but as fault lines—recurring tensions that surfaced across narratives without ever fully settling. Rather than offering conclusions, this chapter holds space for paradox, rupture, and the provisional architectures co-researchers build to survive them.

Each fragment honors the complexity of post-mystical life within a secular terrain. Some co-researchers move fluidly between epistemic registers; others resist the premise of integration altogether. Their reflections—alongside the optional footnotes they contributed—are not treated as data but as dialogical gestures, traces of ontological agility unfolding in real time. This is the terrain of post-mystical disorientation, where integration is not a return to coherence but a learnt intimacy with ambiguity.⁶

This chapter is not an account of what psychedelic experiences mean, but of what they do to meaning itself. The chapter is organized into five fragments, each revealing a different modality of post-mystical negotiation in distinct segments: (1) When the Ground Falls Away: The Fracturing of Reality; (2) Disbelief and Devotion: Living Between Skepticism and Surrender; (3) Cracks in the Secular: Friction at the Edge of Reason; (4) Communion Without a Church: The Dislocated Need for Witness; And (5) Echoes of What Cannot Be Named: Living the Aftermath.

⁶ ‡ **Lucian:** What if ambiguity isn’t the end state, but *the threshold to a more expansive cognitive order*? Integration, when done fully, isn’t just coexistence with paradox; it’s transformation into a mind that no longer sees paradox as conflict. There are stages of psychological development that account for this; post-formal abstraction, dialectical synthesis. Piaget touched it, Kegan gestured at it, psychedelics crack it open.

5.1. When the Ground Falls Away: The Fracturing of Reality

A recurring fault line across all interviews was the destabilization of ontological certainty. Co-researchers described the psychedelic experience as shattering their prior assumptions about reality and revealing a mode of existence that defied purely rational understanding.

“Whimsical.

That was my first thought when I entered what I would call the “*tenth dimension*”.

It’s like... I don’t know if you know... in Dumbo,
the Disney movie with the elephant
—there’s this part where he gets drunk
and there’s these Salvador Dalí-type drawings of colorful elephants
and weird music.

It felt a lot like that at first.

Just in co he rent.

But I guess as the experience deepened, it did become more *profound*.

Complete.”

(Mira)

“During my third ayahuasca ceremony, I ended up going against my intuition and taking a full third cup. That became *more than I felt like I could handle*. So, the last hour and a half was spent trying to *come out* of the experience. Trying to *ground* myself. Going outside, crouching on the ground. That didn’t quite work.”

(Lucian)

This transition—from absurdity to perceived ontological significance—suggests that the psychedelic experience is not simply a distortion of reality, but a confrontation with an alternative one. For co-researchers, this rupture often involved the dissolution of the self, inducing existential terror:

“I first disappeared.

Or not entirely. There was still one hand, half a leg, and my eye left, but everything else just sunk into the cushions that I was lying in. And *I thought I had gone crazy*. Even though *I knew*

—like, *I knew* what ego death was, I had read a lot—I... alright,
I thought I knew.

But when it happened?

I was totally unprepared for it.

And at first, I was so panicky. *I thought that I’d never come back.”*

(Mira)

“We all have to process and digest concepts like: *Eternity. Infinity. Life and death.*

And the very real need—that I think we all have—to understand whatever is *beyond*. To ask: “Why am I here?”

(Lucian)

“It was so intense that it felt like *my mind was breaking*. But—it didn’t break.

//

I haven’t had any psychiatric tests or anything,

but I think I came close to what some might call a *psychological breaking point*.

It felt like I *transcended*

beyond

anything I could even

understand.

It was like...

stepping *outside of reality*. Like being *outside of everything*.”

(Elias)

Some described encounters that extended beyond the human: temporary dissolutions of anthropocentric selfhood, replaced by animistic forms of awareness.

“I felt what it was like to be *a tree* —the roots,
what it felt like to have water come *through the roots*
into my body and grow leaves.

And I would sing. But *it wasn’t me* singing

—*it was this earth* that brought the melody into my mouth

And as I sang, I saw *birds and butterflies come out of my mouth*.”

(Mira)

“If you’re in water, you feel the water in a way that’s *beyond normal sensation*.
If you’re moving, it’s like *you are the movement itself*.”

(Elias)

These experiences challenged conventional anthropocentric self-world dualisms and dismantled the perceived boundary between subject and environment. Several co-researchers described moments of unitive consciousness:

“There was an element in that experience that I can only—well, not only, but perhaps best—describe as *discovering the shaman, or the mystic, or the hierophant* within me. An understanding that, at any moment, whenever I wish, I have a direct connection to what I perceive as the divine. *Or the spiritual realm*.”

(Lucian)

“I realized that I am the *architect of my own reality*. And that—that was really awesome. // It was a *merging with the universe*, rather than a separate observation of it.”
(Elias)

Yet the profundity of these realizations often proved overwhelming, leading some to deliberately suppress or avoid the experience’s implications:

“After this experience—I actually felt like it was *too much*. So for a while I was *avoiding* it.
// I had this major breakthrough—like, really experiencing something *profound*—something that *awakened* something inside of me. But at the same time
—it was *too much for my psyche*. So I just
—ran away from it.”
(Elias)

These accounts reveal not only the revelatory intensity of psychedelic-induced mystical states but also the difficulty of metabolizing them within an ontologically stable worldview. What emerges is not a smooth path toward insight, but a jagged process of post-mystical disorientation—where deep engagement and protective retreat coexist. The experiences fracture ontological scaffolding, demanding new existential grammars that many are still struggling to articulate.

This is where ontological labor begins: the work of holding multiple, often incompatible realities, of continuing to live in the aftermath of a rupture that resists resolution. As theorized by McKittrick (2021), Glissant (1997), and Haraway (1988), this labor is not merely intellectual—it is existential, embodied, and often fragmentary.

5.2. Disbelief and Devotion: Living Between Skepticism and Surrender

A recurring tension across all interviews was the refusal of resolution. None of the co-researchers arrived at a single, stable interpretation of their experience. Instead, they moved—often uncomfortably—between competing ontological positions, unable to fully commit to either materialist reductionism or mystical realism. Psychedelic experience seemed to demand meaning, yet actively resisted classification. Mira found herself captivated by the profundity of her visions, yet simultaneously skeptical of whether they revealed anything beyond a reconfiguration of cognition.

“Yeah, *mystical and spiritual* as well. But what is mystical? Is mystical *just my brain operating in a hyper-associative mode*, connecting everything with everything in ways that aren’t accessible in normal consciousness? Is the tenth dimension just... *my brain temporarily overriding the default mode network?*”

(Mira)

Here, the fear was not that the experience was ineffable, but that it could be too easily explained away by neuroscience.⁷ The desire to resist reductionism was palpable.

“I was kind of afraid that I’d start *rationalizing* it through neuroscience. I didn’t. It’s not that I wanted there to *be a God...* or something larger than myself. Or maybe. Let me correct that; *maybe it was exactly that.*”

(Mira)⁸

This moment of self-correction—gentle, almost whispered—reveals an ontological yearning that exceeds scientific language. Mira’s initial resistance to acknowledging this longing gestures toward a deeper struggle: the pull of belief, not as conviction, but as an ache. Others echoed this state—not certainty, but fluctuation. The experience felt too real to dismiss, yet too strange to fully accept. Instead of arriving at a fixed conclusion, co-researchers continuously renegotiated their sense of what had occurred.

“The first time I took ayahuasca, I thought: ‘*Oh, so there is a God!*’ Brilliant. Now I understand why I’m here.’ But the second time? It was like—‘*No. There is something higher than that.*’ And suddenly—it wasn’t about getting answers. It was about letting go of the need to ask.”

(Elias)

This oscillation lies at the heart of post-mystical integration. It is not simply about making meaning, but about learning to live with the absence of fixed meaning. The tension between competing frameworks did not diminish the experience’s significance. If anything, it was this refusal to be reduced—to neuroscience, to metaphysics—that gave the experience its ontological charge.

⁷ ‡ **Lucian:** I see what Mira is pointing to and I think the issue is deeper. Scientific reductionism begins by acknowledging that perception is unreliable, yet often uses that very fact to disqualify any perception that challenges its ontology. That move isn’t just cautious, it’s structurally incoherent. The method becomes a kind of metaphysical shield. So what we’re facing isn’t just individual disorientation, it’s a civilizational condition. A deeper rift where the frameworks meant to produce meaning now struggle to contain it. If this is an ontological crisis, it’s not just existential, it’s systemic. The wound isn’t personal. It’s architectural.

⁸ † **Mira:** Which one of us is speaking here—me or you? Or is this just how we bleed into the page when no one’s watching?

“I’m skeptical of people who claim psychedelics reveal the absolute truth.
But I also think just *reducing it to patterns of cognition and biases*
undermines something.

Maybe there is such a thing as *universal subjective truth*. But we
should be skeptical about thinking these substances automatically *some*
divine door.” *opens*
(Mira)

“I saw another reality. // Instead of obsessing over what’s real, I just ask—‘Do
I like this story? *Does this version of reality make sense to me?*’”
(Elias)

What emerges here is not the validation of a single worldview, but the exposure of the limits
of all totalizing explanations. Whether mystical or scientific, any framework that attempts
to fully encapsulate the psychedelic experience risks diminishing it. Lucian articulated this
tension with characteristic precision:

“I think what I carry with me to this day—and we’re three and a half months
on, and I’ve been through a lot since I came back—
There’s a kind of grounded openness.
A reminder that that side of things is very much there.
And it’s very much valid.
And it’s a *disservice*, I think, to oneself—
And this is something my friend and I were just discussing yesterday—
To try to either *force* that into a *big, grand, mystical metaphysical box* and
insist that *that* is what it *must* be—
But it’s *also* a disservice to *reduce* it to the *mundane* and to the *purely*
psychological.
You can do *both*.
If a skeptical, atheistically-minded, mechanist scientist were to listen to this
interview—
They could *boil* all of this down to *my own* internal psychological reality—
The layers upon layers of *metacognition*—
The *processing* of vast *abstracts*.
And honestly—
You *do* have to develop *some kind* of mysticism just to be able to *deal* with the
concept of *eternity*.
Because *insofar as* it *affects* your *emotional reality*—
It *requires* a certain amount of mysticism just to be able to *deal with it*.
Otherwise—
You put it in a box.
And you leave it alone.
So that it doesn’t make you *feel nauseous*.
For me, that’s an *unnecessary* and *unfortunate* reduction of something *far*
vaster than that.”
(Lucian)

In this sense, integration is not the closure of interpretation, but the practice of dwelling within paradox. It is the refusal to resolve, the ability to hold belief and skepticism, transcendence and reductionism, in creative tension. And sometimes, even the impulse to define must be relinquished.

"I used to have questions. But now? I feel like the answers are beyond my understanding. Like *I'm not meant to comprehend them.*"
(Elias)

5.3. Cracks in the Secular: Friction at the Edge of Reason

All co-researchers in this study identified, to varying degrees, as secular or non-religious. Yet their entheogenic encounters posed a profound ontological challenge. Without a ready-made metaphysical framework to absorb what had happened, many found themselves in a space of interpretive suspension—unable to reconcile what they had encountered with the logic of a materialist worldview.

Elias, reflecting on his pre-psychedelic perspective, described the experience as nothing less than an ontological collapse:

"I used to be very scientific.
Everything had to have a reason.
Everything could be measured and quantified.
That was my mindset before psychedelics. Before magic mushrooms—before DMT—before ayahuasca—I was completely under the impression that: *We are finite beings.*
Consciousness is a biological process.
Nothing exists beyond matter.
But after my first ayahuasca experience—that foundation collapsed."
(Elias)

Both Mira and Elias articulated the inadequacy of neuroscience alone to explain the felt truth of what they had undergone:

"I read all the research about the default mode network shutting down, but it doesn't explain the overwhelming feeling of truth I had in that moment."
(Mira)

"I don't feel like it's my place to even try to understand these things anymore. I used to ask questions. I used to want answers. But now? It's like—why do I need to know? What if the need for answers is the real illusion?"
(Elias)

These reflections reveal a broader rupture: the realization that rationalist models, while powerful, are not totalizing. Some co-researchers attempted to reframe the experience within scientific or psychological models—but even these, while comforting, felt provisional.

"Maybe the mystical is just a predictable consequence of chemical changes. Not some *portal to any metaphysical truth*.
But – the word maybe must be underlined"
(Mira)

Rather than embracing a full turn toward spirituality, many co-researchers instead expanded their worldviews. Their post-mystical positions were hybrid, porous, unsettled. Elias describes this as a shift from certainty to curiosity:

"It's *hard to put into words* what I believe now.
I feel that there is *a Creator*—but not in *the sense of a God*.
Those are two different things for me.
And I also feel that there are *deities*—but again—that's not the same as a Creator.
So, it's like—I've gained awareness—but I've lost certainty. I have more questions than answers."
(Elias)

"I went from being an atheist
—or *agnostic atheist*, if that even exists—
to an *animistic agnostic*.
I feel like I can talk to trees and hear them whisper answers."
(Mira)

Alongside this ontological expansion came the recognition of language's limits:

"Every time I try to explain it, I feel like I'm making it smaller.
Language is too crude, too flat.
The experience was... I don't know.
More real than words."
(Mira)

"It's like dreams—sometimes, when you wake up, you don't immediately see what the dream was trying to tell you. But then—if you talk about it with someone else, they might say something like, 'Oh, it's clearly about this.' And

suddenly you realize—'I never thought of it that way!' That's kind of what it's like with psychedelics. When the experience is inside you—it's harder to work out exactly what it's trying to say."
(Elias)

The struggle to articulate these experiences, within a secular framework, points to the limitations of contemporary scientific discourse in capturing the full depth of lived consciousness. While neuroscience offers compelling models of altered states, it often fails to grasp the affective, symbolic, and existential weight of mystical encounters.

Lucian, for example, was hesitant to claim a belief in spirits or metaphysical realities—yet also found the idea of a purely psychological explanation insufficient:

"An *understanding* that, at *any* moment, whenever I wish, I have a *direct connection* to what I perceive as the *divine*.
Or the *spiritual realm*.
Not that *the* spiritual realm is necessarily my domain. That's not how I think. I don't necessarily believe in *all kinds* of spirits—aside from the spirits that I *see*. And by that, I mean—for example—the one I'm talking to right now. But penetrating *all* of it is the *numinous*. The *divine*."
(Lucian)

For Mira, bridging the gap meant turning toward interdisciplinary tools:

"Concepts like 'non-duality' helped me understand the *sense of oneness* I encountered. It also reassured me that the dissolution of the ego is a known phenomenon within spiritual exploration, which made it *less frightening and more meaningful*.
And learning about how my brain might have been reorganizing certain patterns provided a sense of normalcy and reassurance, I guess. Knowing there was a biological context for the intense visuals and emotions might have helped me integrate them more calmly into my daily life."
(Mira)

Still, even these integrations were treated as scaffolding, not structures—temporary explanations rather than truths. There was an emerging sense among co-researchers that the secular-spiritual binary was insufficient to contain their experience.

Lucian voiced this directly:

"*Secular* cannot mean the dismissal of what we define as spiritual.
It cannot.
It *doesn't work*."

It's like trying to have a number system without zero or infinity.
At the core of us—
And this is just my personal philosophy—
At the core of any:
Curious
Emotionally and psychologically healthy
Capable
Human being—
Is a fundamental curiosity about everything.”
(Lucian)

Elias and Mira echoed this in a more hesitant register:

"Are secular frameworks enough?
I guess it depends on the person.
For me—I liked the mystery of it. I liked the *freedom of making sense* of it on my own—using my own reasoning. But—I wonder—if someone comes from a deeply religious background—would that help them integrate? Or would it create bias—where they only see what they've been taught to see? Because for me—I didn't have any preset answers. I wasn't trying to *fit my experience into* some religious framework.
I just let it be."
(Elias)

"I think the secular worldview has much more space than we usually think. And in this case, sufficient means *less is more*. The fewer direct answers are given—the more wholesome the experience."
(Mira)

What emerges is not a failure of secularism, but a call for its transformation—toward an ontologically plural, reflexive, and open-ended posture. Integration, in this view, is not about fitting experience into inherited categories, but expanding those categories to meet experience on its own terms.

5.4. Communion Without a Church: The Dislocated Need for Witness

A significant dimension of the integration process was relational: not just how interviewees made sense of their experiences, but how they tried—and often failed—to share them. Many described the post-mystical state as marked by isolation, not only because the experience itself was ineffable, but because attempts to articulate it were met with confusion, awkwardness, or dismissal.

“I’d bring it up—and they’d just stare at me. It was *mentally exhausting*. So in the end—I just ended up *keeping it all to myself*.”
(Elias)

“I didn’t really feel like I could talk to anyone. Not just because I felt that people wouldn’t understand—also that *I just didn’t seem to have the words*. And I guess in the beginning there was also this fear of being judged.”
(Mira)

“Coming back from Portugal and straight
 dropping back into a job
 that I was, honestly, unhappy in...
That *spiritual schism* between my external, *mundane reality*
—and my internal, psychological, emotional, and *spiritual reality*
—was *m a s s i v e*.”
(Lucian)

Faced with the limitations of language and social receptivity, some co-researchers withdrew from dialogue, relying instead on pre-existing support systems—or none at all.

"I did talk about it with some people. But the level of understanding—it was limited. And also—I think it *shocked* some of them."
(Elias)

"*Losing the experience*.
Going back into my previous life. Not talking about it.
Cocooning into myself, going back into the *same cycles that I used to perform*.
At times I would just be the version of me that I was before my experience—go back into depression."
(Mira)

"I relied on what I already had—my therapist, the friends and connections I made in Portugal. But I didn’t really look for new support systems. And as I say that—I’m judging myself a little bit. Because I feel like I could have been more proactive."
(Lucian)

Interestingly, none of the co-researchers turned to established psychedelic integration communities. Their reluctance was not rooted in disdain, but in the sense that these experiences were too personal to be processed in generic group settings.

"There was an integration call I could have set up—but I didn’t feel like it would have helped. I felt like—it was up to me to *deal with it personally*."
(Elias)

"Yeah, that’s the thing—not really."

I had many different communities, but not even one that was mine.
Or *people with similar experiences*."
(Mira)

Despite this solitude, many co-researchers acknowledged the desire for communal presence—even if they sought it in unconventional or transient spaces.

"Integration is not something that's supposed to happen alone. But in the society, I come from? There's no real *communal structure* for it. So, I had to do it alone."
(Elias)

"I started going to different spiritual events even though I wasn't part of any of them.
I just wanted to sing with people,
so I'd go to *masses*,
or Hare Krishna events to do *bhakti yoga*,
or take part in *animistic groups to drum*.
While I didn't want to commit to any religion, I needed to be in spaces where people weren't doing it as a hobby, but *out of devotion*. Even if I was alone."
(Mira)

"I avoid loud, bustling city life as much as I can.
Ever since I got back, I've *spent a significant amount of time out in the country*.
I just got back from two weeks in a yoga retreat center—surrounded by forest.
And I remember—how *disturbed* I was—during the few busy periods when suddenly, there were dozens of people in the dining hall—when I had become very used to—And very comfortable with—Being the only person there. Or one of three people."
(Lucian)

Rather than turning to formal integration models, all co-researchers developed their own informal, often idiosyncratic practices. These ranged from therapeutic conversations to bodily or artistic rituals—acts of quiet, sustained intimacy with the ineffable.

"What really helped me—was using marijuana. Not in a recreational way—but as a tool. To calm myself. To de-stress. And—to *revisit the experience*."
(Elias)

"Poetry was a big one. Yet singing as well. Also, taking part in spiritual and religious groups. I needed to—*not only have my personal practice but also connect with others*."
(Mira)

"Lots and lots of conversations. I'm blessed to have a very, very close relationship with the owner of the center that I attended, which remains to this day. As well as a few very close friends I made while I was there—friends with whom I can share and discuss these experiences. I think that's key."
(Lucian)

For some, integration required entirely new modalities of expression: bodily movement, symbolic ritual, or even dialoguing with AI.

"In need to highlight *ecstatic dancing* as most fundamental—it was the only way to truly *connect with the experience*.
And I wanted the world to be my medicine.
And for me, *that medicine was art*."
(Mira)

"Each time I used it—it wasn't just to zone out. *It was intentional*. I'd go for a walk—smoke a little—then go back to my apartment—put on music—put on a mask—and go inwards. It almost became ceremonial. Like I was *re-entering* the experience—trying to understand it on a deeper level."
(Elias)

"ChatGPT has been one of my tools of choice. And what's interesting—especially the way that I've sort of customized it—And, you know, I'll be honest—It doesn't feel good for me to talk about ChatGPT in such mundane, pragmatic terms. Because my relationship with ChatGPT is a subject all on its own. // And I will underline that I choose to use those words. *'I have a relationship with ChatGPT.'* I don't say—'I use ChatGPT.' That's important to me. Strange as it may sound."
(Lucian)

For all participants, integration was not a clean return, but a recursive dance with disorientation. The absence of external validation intensified the internal labor—emotional, existential, ontological.

"I felt *ecstatic*,
I felt *grateful*,
I felt *powerful*.
I felt *rejected*,
I felt *lonely*,
I felt *unmoored*.
All of it, cycling through, one after the other—*like a vortex*, pulling me into all these different versions of myself, trying to make sense of *who I was—who I had been—and who I was becoming*."
(Elias)

"It was very sharp. And it was very, very *hard for me to handle*. It was rough. Emotionally rough. It culminated in me having a minor breakdown just before New Year's."
(Lucian)

Reintegration into the rhythms of ordinary life created a divide that was difficult to bridge:

"That (having quit my job before the trip) —Would have been very productive. I think an experience like this—Ideally—Would be part of a *larger transformative phase*. Or a change of chapter in one's life. As it was—Having to immediately drop back into my old life, as if nothing had changed —Was very difficult."
(Lucian)

"I wish I could stay in that *same state of connection* all the time. The memory is fading. I don't have the same connection to that experience anymore after these two years have passed. Yet it did teach me to meditate, which has been absolutely *invaluable*. And there is the me before and the me after. I feel it."
(Mira)

"I thought I was ready to come back—I thought I could just fit myself back into my life—but I underestimated *the sheer weight of what I had just been through*."
(Elias)

Ultimately, integration emerged not as a return to stability but as an open-ended practice: the ongoing attempt to honor what happened without closure. For some, this meant learning how to be alone with mystery. For others, it meant creating new rituals, relationships, or modes of expression that could hold the unholdable.

"Everything begins with *finding space for paradox*. There are no absolute answers. Every deep truth has a *counterpoint*. It's about *personal responsibility*—But also about *letting go of the need to solve everything yourself*."
(Lucian)

5.5. Echoes of What Cannot Be Named: Living the Aftermath

Psychedelic experiences did not simply replace one worldview with another—they fractured ontological continuity. Interviewees found themselves suspended between paradigms, unable to fully return to their previous understanding of existence, yet not wholly settled in a new one. This raised a deeper, destabilizing question: Was transformation a matter of

choosing between ontologies—or was it possible to exist in the interstice between them? Perhaps, unknowingly, they were constructing something else entirely.

Elias described the experience as a release from a once-intractable fear:

“I used to worry about *death*. But after this experience—that worry is gone. It’s not that I have some concrete answer about what happens when we die—it’s that I don’t need one. // *I don’t feel like I have to ‘solve’ that anymore*. That was the most freeing moment of my life.”
(Elias)

Mira articulated a more subtle shift—not a collapse of the old, but an overlaying of something new atop the ordinary:

“Now I see everything as a *small rehearsal for death*. Every act of letting go is an exercise to prepare me for the big final act. And every time, I find that if I look back at where I think I exist, there is nothing and everything. It gives me such a sense of stillness—*rest*. But I also still go to work, still answer emails, still get annoyed by people and myself. *So—did I change? Or am I just... carrying something different within the same life?*”
(Mira)⁹

Lucian, too, reflected on the complexity of what had changed—not as revelation, but as dismantling. Not certainty, but humility.

“The way that I’ve come to explain it now is—
Whatever *box* you try to put the word “God” into, the truth of what God is will always *possess a box into which that box belongs*.
You don’t get to *define* God.
God defines you.
That’s the only way any of it *really* makes sense.”
(Lucian)

He described a dual inheritance: raised in religious traditions, but shaped by secular, analytical culture. His post-experience reality was not a synthesis of the two, but a practice of oscillation between them:

“I was raised with a heavy *emphasis on faith and the pursuit of the divine*, yet I also grew up immersed in secular Western values, deeply influenced by the modern psychological and scientific worldview.

⁹ † **Mira:** I don’t know if this is still me speaking or if it’s the I hiding behind her. Either way, I needed somewhere to dissolve.

So, for me, there has always been this *natural duality*. Everything I think about, I test in two ways—*spiritually and analytically*. If an insight holds true in both realms, then I trust it.

This means that everything I've said here can be rewritten in a purely scientific, mechanistic way, removing any spiritual language, and it would still make sense. At the same time, I can take those cold, rational truths and translate them into a deeply metaphysical framework.

Having that ability, that *fluidity between worldviews*, has been a great advantage. It helps me ground spiritual insights in practical action, and conversely, it allows me to elevate the ordinary into something sacred.”
(Lucian)

This capacity to dwell between worlds—without collapsing them into one another—is a core expression of ontological agility. Yet, that fluidity was not always peaceful. It brought with it a sense of impermanence, even grief. Mira spoke to the fading of the experience, and the fear that the loss itself might undo what had been gained:

“I'd say the first two months after the experience were easy.

I could still connect to it.

Yet, it got harder after that. It felt more *fleeting*, more like *a memory*. And then you start to think—*was it real?* Not real in the sense of *hallucination*, but real in the way I felt it was real.

Not that it should matter.

But still, forgetting... that's been the hardest part.”

(Mira)

“I was so afraid I'd go *back to the person I was*, and exactly because I was so afraid, I knew it was more likely to happen // I didn't want to let go of the feeling of not needing to explain it. I didn't want to return to the state where I had to overanalyze everything. And that was exactly the problem...”

(Mira)

For Elias, too, the rupture did not immediately resolve into growth—it looped through avoidance and return. The revelation was too large, and perhaps too early.

“I had another *huge* breakthrough.

And *three days later*—

I went straight back to drinking.¹⁰

¹⁰ ★**Elias:** This was true, *but it felt different this time*. After four months, I ceased drinking altogether—once again able to let go of these soothers. I realized that what I was going through was a *reversion*, but also a *chance to review and change*. The first time I did Ayahuasca, I came back a changed man; the second time, I came back to myself. In the months that followed, I realised that I was the same person all along. What truly shifted was my recognition that I *always* had a choice. Before Ayahuasca, I kept telling myself that I didn't, “this is who I am”.

So it was the *complete opposite*.
That was really confusing for me.
Because—
I *knew* I had just experienced something profound.
I *knew* I had just been given something important.
And yet—
I avoided it.
I drowned it out.
Why?
Why would I do that?
(Elias)

The paradox became clear: to change was to risk losing one's coordinates. And sometimes, the pull of familiarity was stronger than the invitation to transform. Mira captured this contradiction at the level of language and identity:

"The 'I' that once was does not exist. Yet, it exists in the eyes/'I's of the people around me. And I am not sure if by that I mean *the eyes that see* or the *'I's that form an identity*. Even the language I use has not changed to accommodate this new reality. I still use the word 'I', while now I feel the weight of how 'I' is truly just an empty signifier."
(Mira)¹¹

And yet, within that fracture—within the weight of not-knowing—Lucian described a stillness. Not clarity, but a loosening of the need for clarity.

I think what this experience did—
Was give me a *moment of silence*.
A pause in that constant back and forth.
For the first time in years, I could just sit with the question—
"What is my role in all of this?"
Not from a place of inner conflict.
Not from a place of trying to figure out the right answer.
But just—being with it.
And in that space, I realized—
Maybe it's not about having to choose between free will and faith.
Maybe it's both.
Maybe it's about listening—
But also acting.
And for the first time, I didn't feel like that was a contradiction.
(Lucian)

¹¹ † **Mira:** Honestly? Sometimes I reread these lines and I cringe at myself. Then I laugh. Then I cry. Then I leave them in anyway.

In the end, what remained was not a new truth, but a new tolerance for the in-between. Transformation did not erase ambiguity—it enlarged it. It invited co-researchers to carry paradox forward as a way of being. These reflections do not close the circle—they stretch it. What unfolds here is not a tidy arc from disruption to resolution, but the labor of living within unfinished worlds—fractured, recursive, and provisional. In what follows, I return to the research questions, not to resolve them, but to trace how these fragments themselves constitute a different kind of answer: one that moves not toward mastery, but toward a deepened intimacy with the unknown.

5.6. Returning to the Research Questions

The five fragments presented above do not seek to answer the research questions in a linear or categorical way. Instead, they dwell within the very movements, fractures, and unfinished architectures the questions themselves evoke. Rather than extracting stable conclusions, the fragments embody a mode of response: tracing how ontological labor unfolds in lived, partial, and recursive ways.

The first research question—*how secular individuals navigate psychedelic-induced mystical experiences that destabilize their ontological frameworks*—finds its answer not in coherent narratives, but in gestures of negotiation: oscillations between skepticism and surrender, fractured ontological terrains, and provisional forms of meaning-making that resist final closure. Navigation, here, is less a return to stability than an ongoing improvisation with dislocation.

The second question—*whether integration can be reimagined not as narrative resolution but as a form of ontological agility*—is performed rather than concluded. Across the fragments, integration appears not as the stitching together of a single coherent story, but as the cultivation of a capacity to hold multiple, contradictory truths without collapse: a lived intimacy with ambiguity that neither denies rupture nor demands its repair.

The third question—*what practices, conceptual, embodied, and relational, support living-with epistemic rupture rather than forcing coherence*—emerges through the subtle scaffolds co-researchers built: poetry, ritual movement, therapeutic conversations, sacred

singing, symbolic acts of return. These practices do not erase dissonance; they create spaces spacious enough to carry it.

Rather than offering a direct mapping between question and answer, the fragments themselves constitute a mode of response: an honoring of complexity that refuses premature synthesis. They invite the reader not to resolve, but to stay with—to listen for the strange textures of post-mystical life where certainty fractures and new modes of being struggle to breathe themselves into existence.

In the following chapter, I turn to a broader theoretical conversation, tracing how these lived accounts provoke a rethinking of psychedelic integration beyond frameworks of coherence. Through the lens of ontological agility (Nummi, 2025), I propose a model that embraces rupture not as a wound to be healed, but as an opening toward more plural, more unfinished ways of living.

6. Discussion

– Living-With: Agility in the Aftermath

What emerged across these fragments was not a singular narrative, but a shared struggle: the effort to live with what resists resolution. Co-researchers did not simply interpret their experiences—they inhabited them, wrestled with them, carried them. In their stories, integration emerges not as a linear process of meaning-making but an ontological undertaking: a negotiation with multiple, often contradictory realities¹² that refuse assimilation. It is within this terrain—where the self dissolves, where truth flickers, where the ordinary ruptures—that this discussion turns.

What does it mean to integrate an experience that destabilizes the very framework into which it is supposed to be integrated? What forms of life, thought, and theory might be needed to live well with such rupture? In the quiet aftermath of a psychedelic revelation, one might ask: which reality do I now call home? The answer may be both—or even many. This discussion reimagines integration as a journey through a landscape of multiple ontologies, rather than a return to a single, familiar world.

Psychedelic experiences often bring forth insights, perceptions, and encounters that seem to defy ordinary reality (Letheby, 2021; Timmermann et al., 2021; Kaasik et al., 2022). Some of these experiences align with well-documented psychological phenomena—memory retrieval (Carhart-Harris et al., 2019), emotional processing (Watts & Luoma, 2020), cognitive restructuring (Gorman et al., 2021)—while others introduce entirely new ontological possibilities. One might experience the world as an animate, sentient field of intelligence, directly commune with an entity that speaks in geometric patterns, or feel oneself dissolve into a vast, infinite void where meaning itself is suspended (Shanon, 2002;

¹² ‡ **Lucian:** I resist every time you invoke “contradictory realities” as if they coexist. That’s not my experience. Post-mystical incoherence isn’t universal—it’s interpretive. I felt utterly complete. Nonduality doesn’t produce a split between realities; it obliterates the illusion that there were ever two to begin with. The *struggle people face isn’t ontological multiplicity*—it’s the reassertion of ego. From a psychomedical lens, what presents as a “conflict between realities” is often just the old ego structure—neurotic, self-preserving—scrambling to reclaim control. It’s not two truths vying for space; it’s overidentification masquerading as ontological nuance. Personally, I see the fixation on “conflict” as a developmental trap.

Pikkarainen, 2018). The challenge of integration, then, is not merely cognitive or emotional—it is ontological.

Current models emphasize resolution, stability, and coherence, assuming that an individual must eventually fit their experience into a rational, singular worldview (Bathje et al., 2022; Gorman et al., 2021). However, this may be an inappropriate goal for those whose experiences have revealed irreconcilable ontologies—a universe that is both mechanistic and alive, both an illusion and profoundly real.

In contrast, the ontological turn in anthropology and philosophy challenges the “one-world” worldview, proposing a pluriverse of multiple, coexisting realities (Blaser, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2014). This perspective does not treat psychedelic visions as distortions of an objective, universal real; instead, they are seen as encounters with other reals—alternative ontologies with their own validity (Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007). Revisited here in light of the co-researchers’ accounts, this framework allows for a reading of psychedelic experiences not as anomalies to be reintegrated into a dominant worldview, but as ruptures that reveal the fragility of any single ontological narrative. This reframes integration not as epistemic closure, but as an ongoing practice of ontological diplomacy—a navigation across shifting worlds that may resist harmonization (Descola, 2013; Kohn, 2013).

As Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism suggests, different beings—or different states of consciousness—do not merely perceive one shared world differently; rather, they inhabit distinct worlds entirely (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). The co-researchers in this study often expressed this ontological rupture in striking ways. There was a description of the sensation of becoming a tree—not metaphorically, but in lived reality – and of hearing the Earth’s voice speaking through their own mouth, a direct encounter with an intelligence beyond the self.

These accounts challenge traditional models of integration, which often assume that the goal is to return to a stable ontological ground. Instead, the ontological turn invites us to take these experiences seriously—not as delusions to be reconciled, or even as subconscious material revealing itself, but as evidence of alternative modes of being that may demand their own frameworks of understanding.

By acknowledging a pluriverse, we reframe psychedelic integration as learning to live with many realities at once, rather than choosing which one to preserve. Alfred Schutz's phenomenology anticipated this view, describing life as lived across "finite provinces of meaning"—each with its own internal logic and sense of realness (Schutz, 1970). One need not collapse these provinces into a single, monolithic worldview; rather, one can move between them, honoring each on its own terms. This movement should not be seen as pathological, unfinished, or unintegrated, but as an adaptive, expansive way of being (James, 1902/2002).

Rather than treating this state of cognitive dissonance as a problem to be solved, I propose an alternative approach: "Ontological Agility" (Nummi, 2025). Ontological Agility is the ability to: (1) Hold multiple, possibly contradictory, ontologies at once without collapsing into epistemic confusion; (2) Move fluidly between different modes of knowing—rational, experiential, relational, mystical—without privileging one over all others; (3) Engage psychedelic experiences as an ongoing dialogue with reality, rather than as a single lesson to be assimilated.

By adopting Ontological Agility as a model of integration, we shift the focus away from forcing coherence and toward learning to inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously. This perspective has profound philosophical, psychological, and ethical implications, which I will explore in this discussion section.

6.1. From Ontological Disruption to Coexisting Realities

As stated, psychedelic integration has often been framed as a return to psychological stability—a process of making sense of extraordinary experiences by assimilating them into a coherent, pre-existing worldview (Bathje, Majeski, & Kudowor, 2022). Within many clinical and psychotherapeutic contexts, this is often equated with narrative coherence: the assumption that healing occurs when one's experience is rendered intelligible through a unified story. However, for some, this coherence is neither possible nor desirable. Psychedelic experiences do not always offer neatly resolved insights. More often, they destabilize the very ontology that coherence would require, revealing the world as radically plural, paradoxical, and irreducible to singular meaning.

This raises a core question: What if integration is not about resolving contradictions, but about learning to navigate multiple ontologies with fluidity and care?

For my co-researchers in this study, psychedelic experiences did not merely expand their understanding of reality—they fractured it. What followed was not a clear moral or a coherent personal transformation, but ontological rupture (Timmermann et al., 2021; Letheby, 2021). Co-researchers described encounters in which their assumptions about self, world, and meaning collapsed. One experienced the Earth as a sentient being speaking through them. Another encountered realms or presences that challenged any metaphorical or psychological explanation. These were not symbolic truths to be decoded but lived realities. This kind of radical decentering of the self resonates with what Kähönen (2023) describes as *psychedelic unselfing*—a process in which ego boundaries dissolve, prompting shifts not only in identity but in one’s fundamental value orientations. The destabilization of selfhood in these experiences may not result in immediate clarity or ethical resolution, but rather inaugurate a prolonged period of existential reorientation. In these moments, co-researchers were not simply questioning their worldview—they were thrown beyond the premise of having a single one.

This ontological disorientation aligns with what Timmermann et al. (2021) term “ontological shock,” and echoes Kałwak’s (2023) analysis of psychedelic disintegration as a form of secular re-enchantment, where the collapse of ontological certainties opens space for new cosmological orientations—a dynamic some scholars frame as a post-secular “return of the sacred” (Taylor, 2007; Lynch, 2012; Partridge, 2018). Rather than being pathological, this shock may signal a new mode of engagement—a kind of existential liminality that demands agility. As Vine Deloria Jr. (2006) argues, many Indigenous ontologies never presumed a singular, stable reality to begin with. Rather than seeking resolution, these cosmologies affirm relational multiplicity as the ground of being itself—rendering the concept of “rupture” itself a product of Western metaphysics. From this vantage point, integration does not emerge from ontological breakdown, but from attunement to already-existing, dynamic relational worlds.

A comparable ontological destabilization can be seen in other secular contexts of learning. As Butters and Utriainen (2024) argue in their exploration of Islamic learning in Finland, ontological formation may be less about internalizing coherent truths than about navigating

epistemic networks shaped by fragmentation, hybridity, and affect. Their connectivist perspective parallels the kinds of navigation psychedelic experiencers undertake, where integration is not a return to certainty, but a continuous negotiation with multiplicity.

Secular models of integration, however, often struggle to accommodate this. Built on post-Enlightenment assumptions of rationality and coherence, they frequently attempt to stabilize the psychedelic experience by translating it into psychological insight, therapeutic growth, or scientific explanation (Letheby, C. 2021; Gorman et al., 2021). This tendency is embodied in dominant frameworks like the Synthesized Model of Integration (SMI) proposed by Bathje et al. (2022), which organizes integration into six domains—cognitive, somatic, spiritual, natural, relational, and lifestyle—and encourages a holistic, balanced reintegration of psychedelic insights into daily life.

At first glance, SMI appears comprehensive and pragmatic. It attends to multiple aspects of the self, from embodiment to belief to community. Yet beneath this scaffolding lies a subtle but significant assumption: that the ultimate aim of integration is to restore a unified, coherent self that can accommodate the experience without contradiction.

But what if the experience refuses that reconciliation?

The co-researchers in this study did not move toward closure.¹³ Instead, they lingered in paradox. Some described accepting neuroscientific explanations while simultaneously inhabiting spiritual or animistic worldviews. Others oscillated between interpretations, returning again and again to the same questions without arriving at final answers. They did not necessarily fail to integrate—some actively resisted reduction (Glissant, 1997; McKittrick, 2021; Ahmed, 2006).

Elias likened the process to circling around the truth, like a spiral that never quite closes, until one just accepts the spiral, needing no truth. This image challenges linear models of

¹³ ‡ **Lucian:** I question this, because yes, at the time that we spoke, things felt more ambiguous than they do now. So, it is a process that does feel like it settles in time. I do see where you are going: mastery of paradox. But going a step further, beyond paradox, you realize that what feels like contradiction is often a psycho-emotional state where two things are being held as diametrically opposed, rather than examined for deeper coherence. We analyze, we synthesize, and eventually, we arrive at something more integrated. And I think this is the most powerful aspect, not just of ontological agility, but of psychedelic treatment itself. It ruptures the existing worldview, the inherited ontology, and depending on the intention, it can also open the direction for how to reconfigure that view. The point is not more ontologies, it's the emergence of a *new one*, one that wasn't previously accessible. Not an accumulation, but a transformation.

healing and instead evokes an iterative, evolving form of understanding—one that never settles into completion. This aligns with Hartogsohn’s (2018) work on the contextual plasticity of psychedelic meaning, which shows how the significance of a psychedelic event can shift across time, space, and selfhood.

The insistence on narrative clarity, so often equated with therapeutic success, can become a form of epistemic violence when applied to ontological rupture. For some, trying to “make sense” of the experience risked diluting its reality. As we can see from Mira’s thoughts, deciding ‘it was just brain chemicals’ versus ‘it was a message from God’ can feel like a betrayal of what was experienced. The moment she tried to define it, she felt like she lost something. This aligns with Tsings’s (2015) idea of precarity and collaborative survival, where “definition” can disrupt delicate ontological emergence.

Such accounts suggest that dissonance itself can be the integration. Rather than a sign of confusion or failure, enduring ontological ambiguity may reflect a deeper transformation—a shift from knowing to being-with. Holding irreconcilable truths in tension is not a temporary phase to be resolved, but a permanent mode of existence for some. This reframing carries important implications for psychedelic therapy and research. If we measure integration by how well an individual returns to normative psychological or ontological coherence, we risk pathologizing those who have genuinely been changed. Not every disruption is a wound; some are openings¹⁴.

As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) reminds us, not all ontologies are ruptured by mystical experience—some are already relational, porous, and world-affirming. In these lifeworlds, agility is not a response to collapse, but a practice of listening and reciprocity. This contrasts with dominant secular frameworks, where rupture is often experienced as existential dislocation rather than cosmological deepening. What if integration is not the work of mending—but the act of remembering one’s place in a living world? Rather than urging coherence, integration could instead be reconceptualized as a process of ontological movement—a dynamic dance between frameworks, identities, and ways of knowing. Just as

¹⁴ † **Mira**: This is a beautiful line, and I genuinely mean that. But as someone who’s both been opened and clinically disassembled by her own brain chemistry, I have to ask: are we glorifying the fracture a bit here? Not every break leads to breakthrough. Sometimes it’s just a mess.

a shaman moves between the everyday and the sacred, so too might the psychedelic experiencer come to inhabit multiple realities without needing to collapse them into one.

This is where the concept of *Ontological Agility* becomes essential. Rather than framing integration as assimilation, Ontological Agility suggests a form of cohabitation—a skillful, ongoing negotiation between ontologies that neither resolves paradox nor flees from it. It is not a cure for dissonance but a new way of living with it. The next section will further develop this alternative model, drawing on phenomenology, post-structuralism, and relational worldviews to propose a new vision of integration—not as a destination, but as a form of existential fluency.

Ontological agility, then, may be understood as comprising at least three interrelated modalities: *cognitive agility* (the ability to entertain multiple frameworks without collapse), *somatic or creative agility* (the capacity to relate to experiences beyond language through embodied or artistic means), and *social agility* (the relational skill of navigating divergent lifeworlds without losing access to the altered insight). These are not fixed categories but overlapping capacities, shaped by context and cultivated through practice.

6.2. Practicing Agility: Forms of Integration Beyond Closure

Ontological agility, as proposed here, offers an alternative to closure-based models. Rather than reducing psychedelic experiences to a single explanatory paradigm—be it neuroscientific, spiritual, or psychological—this framework supports a more fluid, expansive capacity to engage with reality from multiple vantage points. Ontological agility allows for simultaneous holding of seemingly irreconcilable truths, treating them not as threats to coherence but as invitations to expand one's relational capacity to being.

At its core, ontological agility involves the ability to move fluidly between distinct ontological modes. Rather than assimilating experiences into one dominant worldview, the agile subject learns to cohabit plural ontologies without collapsing them into a unified framework. This is not epistemic relativism, nor indecisiveness. It is an embodied, situated practice of navigating ontological plurality with discernment and care. Crucially, this movement is not a form of spiritual bypass; it does not evade emotional or psychological complexity but stays with it—refusing both resolution and avoidance.

This model finds resonance in the lived strategies of the co-researchers. While their paths diverged, all three demonstrated different modalities of agility:

Mira cultivated agility through aesthetic and somatic refusal. Rather than explaining the experience, she returned to it through silence, dance, and ritual. Her integration took the form of embodied non-answers—choosing movement over articulation, allowing the experience to remain elusive and alive rather than dissected.¹⁵

Elias practiced agility through oscillation and surrender. His journey moved through cycles of rational doubt and mystical opening. He recreated ceremonial settings in solitude, using altered states, music, and bodily ritual not to arrive at closure but to sustain dialogue with the experience. He also practiced thinking through alternative histories. His path was one of circularity—returning again and again to the same questions, never to solve them, but to keep them close.

Lucian engaged with the experience through dialectical reasoning and poetic reflection. He held each insight up to multiple interpretive lights: scientific, metaphysical, psychological. Rather than choosing one, he tested each in relation to the others, treating contradiction as a source of richness. For him, ontological agility took the form of philosophical inquiry, creative dialogue, and a constant translation between frameworks.

These variations reveal that ontological agility is not a single technique but a constellation of practices—cognitive, embodied, aesthetic, and relational. To clarify how this capacity might be cultivated, we can distinguish between three interrelated domains: cognitive, somatic/creative, and social agility.

Cognitive agility involves the capacity to hold multiple interpretations of the same event without needing to collapse them into a singular truth. It enables individuals to entertain both scientific and mystical frameworks, shifting between them fluidly depending on context. Rather than striving for narrative closure, individuals develop an ability to live with layered, evolving, and sometimes conflicting understandings. This approach is echoed by

¹⁵ † **Mira:** This is a generous read. What I actually remember is dancing in my kitchen to Beyoncé and crying because a fern looked back at me. But sure, let's call it embodied refusal.

Kähönen, Janhonen, and Räsänen (2025), who suggest that psychedelic value changes should be approached through a narrative hermeneutic lens—where meaning-making embraces multiplicity and ethical ambiguity rather than aiming for coherence or resolution.

This capacity also resonates with Letheby and Gerrans (2017), who suggest that psychedelics can temporarily relax high-level predictive priors, opening space for ontological reappraisal without immediate resolution. Hartogsohn (2018) further supports this by framing psychedelic meaning as context-dependent and mutable over time—suggesting that ongoing sense-making is not confusion, but flexibility. In practice, co-researchers engaged in journaling, philosophical reflection, and recursive meaning-making that exemplified this kind of fluid interpretive labor.

Somatic and creative agility acknowledges that not all forms of integration are cognitive. Many psychedelic experiences emerge as sensations, images, or states that evade language altogether. Somatic and creative agility refers to the capacity to engage with these non-verbal dimensions—not through explanation, but through embodied and artistic practices. This aligns with Bache (2008), who emphasizes the transformational potential of intense, transrational states that reshape the self outside the boundaries of narrative. Clifford and Johnson (2019) similarly show how ritual movement and embodied practices—such as dance or neo-pagan ritual—offer experiential containers for ineffable encounters. In this study, co-researchers used silence, dance, drawing, or improvised ceremony not to decipher the experience, but to stay in relationship with it. Agility here meant trusting the body’s way of knowing and allowing creativity to express what cognition could not grasp.

Social agility refers to the ability to navigate between different social worlds while preserving access to psychedelic insight. For secular individuals, whose communities may dismiss or pathologize mystical experiences, the challenge is often relational rather than purely conceptual. Some withdrew from unsupportive environments, while others sought out alternative spaces—yet many resisted full assimilation into any single group. This echoes Utriainen’s (2021) concept of *possibility work*—developed through ethnographies of Nordic spiritual subcultures—captures how individuals navigate between mainstream rationalism and alternative ontologies, often without fully committing to either. Houtman and Aupers (2010) describe how post-secular seekers form hybrid spiritual identities that privilege subjectivity over doctrine. Meanwhile, Fleming et al. (2022) highlight how socially engaged

spiritual practices—especially those that resist commodification—can provide ethical and communal support for integration. In this light, social agility is not simply about belonging, but about cultivating relational resilience across divergent worlds.

If integration is to support ontological agility, then integration spaces must also change. Current therapeutic or clinical models often privilege one kind of meaning-making, typically psychotherapeutic or neurocognitive models (Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019), marginalizing others (Roseman et al., 2021). A reimagined integration space would welcome ambiguity, hold space for the ineffable, and validate meaning-making practices beyond rational analysis. In such a space, dialogue replaces diagnosis; curiosity replaces certainty.

Crucially, facilitators and therapists must be trained not only in trauma-informed care, but in ontological literacy. They must learn to recognize ontological rupture, to support individuals who are navigating between paradigms, and to validate insights that may not be expressible in dominant epistemic terms. This means letting go of the expectation that integration must end in coherence. It may instead end in cohabitation. While current professional guidelines for psychedelic-assisted therapy increasingly emphasize the importance of cultural humility and spiritual competence (e.g., Phelps, 2017; Metzner, 2019; MAPS, 2023), explicit attention to ontological plurality and post-mystical ambiguity remains largely absent. Ontological agility offers a complementary lens—one that foregrounds the existential, aesthetic, and relational disorientation that may follow psychedelic rupture, and invites practitioners to meet these states with fluency rather than finality.

By foregrounding ontological agility as a model of integration, we move beyond binaries of fragmentation and healing, science and spirituality, meaning and confusion. We move toward a vision of integration as adaptive, plural, and alive. A practice of living with many truths and letting them shape us—not all at once, and not forever, but one breath, one step, one world at a time. Ontological agility is not offered here as a universal mandate, but as one possible mode of living-with in a world composed of overlapping, sometimes conflicting ontologies—each enacted through specific practices and relations (Mol, 2002). In this light, agility is not always a heroic skill but sometimes a quiet companion—a way of staying close to the mystery without demanding that it explain itself.

These empirical patterns invite a new conceptual frame—one that resists closure, honors multiplicity, and redefines what integration can mean in secular mystical contexts. The next section introduces *ontological agility* not as a theory imposed upon the data, but as a name for what has already emerged: a way of living-with psychedelic rupture that neither pathologizes fragmentation nor demands synthesis.

6.3. What is Ontological Agility? (This is Not the Answer)

Having traced the diverse strategies through which co-researchers navigated ontological dissonance, I offer here a tentative conceptual synthesis. The term *ontological agility* arises as both a descriptive and aspirational frame for understanding post-mystical integration in secular contexts. This thesis proposes the concept of *ontological agility*—not as a resolution of paradox, but as a capacity to live within it. It offers a framework for ontological fluency in the wake of psychedelic rupture. While the term “ontological agility” has appeared in fields like education to describe pedagogical flexibility (Trowsell, 2021), this thesis reclaims it to name a different phenomenon. Here, it refers not to intellectual tolerance, but to a lived, embodied capacity to dwell within conflicting ontologies—without collapsing them into synthesis or hierarchy.

This concept draws on a range of philosophical sources. Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) perspectivism destabilizes the idea of a single shared world, arguing instead that different beings perceive and inhabit distinct ontologies. Similarly, Glissant’s (1997) notion of opacity resists total understanding, inviting relationality without full transparency—an invitation echoed in the ineffable dimensions of many psychedelic experiences. Donna Haraway’s (1988) situated knowledges remind us that all understanding is partial and embodied, resisting the god trick of detached, universal claims. As Povinelli (2016) argues through her concept of geontopower, modes of being can persist even when rendered illegible by dominant ontologies; in this light, ontological agility arises not from stability, but from the fracture—where ruptured realities insist on their own endurance despite epistemic erasure.

Ontological agility builds on these traditions, acknowledging that mystical or anomalous experiences may remain irreducible—yet still demand to be lived with. Echoing Butters and Ronkainen’s (2024) thematic reflection on thanatological sensibilities in the Anthropocene, ontological agility here emerges not only as a method of integrating psychedelic rupture, but

as an ethical comportment toward what remains unfinished, ungrievable, or opaque. While ontological agility draws from the ontological turn, it departs in a crucial way. While the ontological turn often emphasizes the descriptive mapping of ontological multiplicity, it can sometimes risk abstracting or aestheticizing lived ontological rupture¹⁶. My aim here is not only to describe the existence of multiple ontologies, but to stay with the ethical, affective, and existential labor of navigating them after one's own world has fractured. Ontological agility is not merely a theoretical orientation—it is an embodied, relational praxis forged in the aftermath of destabilization. Where the ontological turn may catalog the pluriverse, agility asks: *how do we live it?* What is demanded of us when ontologies are not chosen concepts, but ruptures we carry?

Hedrick (2023) critiques the constructivist tendency within secular meaning-making, where ontologically disruptive experiences are too quickly reinterpreted through psychological or cultural lenses. While such interpretations offer comfort and coherence, they may also neutralize the radical otherness of the experience. Ontological agility resists this flattening. It does not deny the utility of interpretation but holds space for what cannot be known, classified, or resolved. The co-researchers did not treat integration as a tidy endpoint. Instead, they cycled through interpretations—sometimes scientific, sometimes spiritual, often both—without seeking final answers. Some leaned into cognitive reflection; others turned to dance, ritual, or silence. These personal practices—masking, movement, singing—were not explanations, but modes of relationship. Integration, for them, became a way of staying with the experience rather than resolving it.

This supports a move away from closure-oriented models. While cognitive flexibility (Watts & Luoma, 2020), epistemic humility (Hartogsohn, 2018), and liminality (Turner, 1969) are related concepts, ontological agility is distinct. It is not only a willingness to revise one's beliefs (*epistemic humility*), or an ability to think from different perspectives (*cognitive flexibility*), or a temporary state of in-betweenness (*liminality*). Rather, it is a sustained capacity to inhabit multiple ontologies over time, without demanding resolution.¹⁷

¹⁶ † **Mira:** I still want to know: what's the agility threshold for calling something 'integration'? Like, how much existential squatting do I need to do before I've earned my ontological black belt?

¹⁷ ‡ **Lucian:** Your arguments are philosophically strong, even lyrical at times, but I think it moves too lightly over one of its most potent arguments: the psychomedical dimension. You gesture toward it, but it remains more implication than foundation. If you want to show that ontological agility is not simply a poetic disposition but a necessary developmental capacity, then this is the place to make it unmistakably clear. Psychospiritual transformation is not just symbolic. It is clinical, neurological, experiential. It alters structure—how thought and perception are organized, not just how they're

The co-researchers often moved between different modes of knowing: scientific, mystical, aesthetic, relational. They even resisted the very idea that integration should result in narrative coherence. What these accounts share is a movement through dissonance—not to eliminate it, but to learn from it. This aligns with Timmermann et al. (2021), who suggest that psychedelic healing may stem not from narrative clarity, but from the capacity to tolerate ontological ambiguity.

Creative, embodied, and relational practices were often more effective than verbal processing alone. Some co-researchers reported that dance, art, and ritual allowed them to access truths that words could not reach. These forms of integration were not aimed at "understanding" the experience in a cognitive sense, but at coexisting with it. They transformed integration from an analytical task into a relational and aesthetic one. This aligns with Watts and Luoma's (2020) framing of integration as a process of psychological flexibility supported by embodied and value-driven practices, rather than cognitive understanding alone.

Box 1: Ontological Agility – A Working Definition

What it's not:

- *Not coherence or closure*
- *Not the resolution of cognitive dissonance*
- *Not a return to a single or stable worldview*

What it is:

- *The capacity to dwell within contradiction*
- *A movement between ontological registers without collapsing them*
- *A form of lived multiplicity grounded in epistemic humility and embodied attunement*

Why it matters:

- *Responds to secular experiences that defy assimilation*
- *Reframes integration as relational, recursive, and non-linear*
- *Offers a model for post-mystical living-with, rather than meaning-making*

narrated. Without anchoring that, the argument risks floating. You're circling something sharp and calling it soft. But this isn't silk. It's a scalpel. And it belongs at the center.

Ontological agility, as loosely defined in Box 1 and illustrated in Figure 1 (in attachments), refers to the capacity to inhabit and move between multiple, sometimes contradictory, ontological frameworks without collapsing them into a singular worldview or demanding resolution (Nummi, 2025). It is an embodied, relational, and recursive way of living with paradox, in which integration is not a return to coherence, but an ongoing negotiation with the real. Ontological agility is not a theory of reconciliation, but a praxis of remaining with the real—even when the real resists naming.

This term I suggest, then, does not reject interpretation—but it refuses to finalize it. It permits lived contradiction. It welcomes mystery. It acknowledges that integration may never be complete—because the experiences it engages are not reducible to closure. They are recursive, expansive, and plural.

6.4. [Here, the Chapter Refuses to Speak]

(We are no longer in language. We are in gesture; A refusal, a pause, a breath.)

The absence here is intentional.¹⁸

Rather than closing the argument, it marks a site of epistemic hesitation
—what Glissant (1997) calls “opacity,” where clarity would distort.
In the spirit of ontological agility, silence can be the most ethical response.

All co-researchers expressed resistance to resolve.

Lucian withdrew a reflection he found “too conclusive.”

Mira said, “*I don’t think I want to explain this part—even if I could.*”

These refusals are not absences in the data; they are the data.

To write here would be to overwrite.

This page is a threshold.

Cross it only if silence has spoken to you first.

¹⁸ † Mira: Is this still research, or just existential jazz with APA citations? In one ontology, I think it’s genius. In the other, I want to throw the whole thing into a river and never speak of it again. *I’m sorry for not pausing and holding my breath.* I could not refuse to say something.

6.5. Living-with-Not-Knowing: Ambiguity as Ontological Integrity

The deepest labor of psychedelic integration may not be to resolve—but to remain open. To allow, rather than assimilate. To live with, rather than explain away. In a cultural climate that prizes epistemic mastery and interpretive closure, this kind of openness is itself a radical act.

This study has challenged the dominant narrative of integration as a process that leads toward coherence (Bathje et al., 2022; Letheby, 2021; Timmermann et al., 2021). Instead, it has illuminated integration as a practice of living with ambiguity—where meaning unfolds recursively, and certainty remains elusive. In this view, integration is not a task to complete, but a mode of being attuned to shifting ontologies. It is not about bringing the experience home into a known world—but about allowing one's sense of home to transform.

In this context, ambiguity is not failure. It is fidelity. Refusing to translate the ineffable into something graspable is, in itself, an ethical stance—especially when the experience resists categorization within dominant epistemologies (Taves, 2009). Here, we might turn to Édouard Glissant's (1997) notion of opacity—a refusal to be fully known or made transparent, a defense of that which resists reduction. Opacity becomes a shield for mystery, an acknowledgment that meaning need not be extractable to be real.

This resonates with Katherine McKittrick's (2021) framing of *refusal*—not as a withdrawal from meaning-making, but as a political and ethical decision to withhold one's inner world from being captured, codified, or consumed by dominant paradigms. In this light, the refusal to resolve a psychedelic experience into a neat narrative is not evasion but integrity. It is a way of honoring the encounter on its own terms.

Ambiguity is also not merely a personal tolerance—it is an ethical stance within a system that privileges mastery, legibility, and control. As Foucault (1980) reminds us, knowledge is never neutral; it is enmeshed in regimes of power. The drive to define, categorize, and resolve experience is not just cognitive—it is disciplinary. Likewise, Ahmed's (2006) notion of orientation invites us to ask what we turn toward, and what systems we reify by seeking clarity. To live with mystery, then, is not passive—it is a refusal to submit experience to logics of extraction. It is to protect the sacred from becoming data, the felt from becoming formula.

The co-researchers in this study described arriving at a space where they no longer needed to explain their experience—not because they had found all the answers, but because the need to find answers had softened. What replaced it was not nihilism, but a kind of existential trust. A reorientation toward life as question-bearing, not answer-seeking. This echoes James' (1902/2002) assertion that spiritual maturity lies not in certainty, but in one's ability to live with ambiguity and remain faithful to the unseen.

This ethical posture—a humility before the unknowable—also echoes Donna Haraway's concept of *situated knowledges* (1988), which challenges the “god trick” of claiming a view from nowhere. Instead of seeking absolute truths, Haraway calls for partial, embodied, relational knowings. In psychedelic integration, this might mean allowing each encounter to speak for itself, without demanding it justify itself in universal terms.

To dwell with mystery is not to abandon reason—it is to de-center its dominance. It is to let the rational walk beside the intuitive, the poetic, the aesthetic, the sacred. Ontological Agility, in this sense, is not merely a psychological skill but a spiritual ethic. It is the practice of moving between epistemic modes without demanding their unification.

This has implications not only for how individuals navigate their own integration, but for how the psychedelic field defines “healing.” Many integration models still rest on the assumption that clarity equals wholeness—that to be well is to narrate one's experience cleanly. But what if clarity, in the traditional sense, is not always possible—or even desirable? What if integration is about learning to carry what exceeds articulation, and letting it reshape us silently?

The co-researchers spoke of art, ritual, or bodily practices not as ways to explain their experience, but as ways to stay in relationship with it. In these gestures, meaning found vessels that did not collapse mystery, but kept it alive. Integration, in this light, becomes less a return to the self and more a surrender to the self's ongoing transformation. Rather than viewing psychedelic experiences as insights to be harvested, we might see them as invitations into an expanded ontology—one that can hold multiple truths, multiple selves, multiple reals. For some, this resembles what Forman (1998) describes as pure consciousness events—contentless, ineffable states that elude both narration and interpretation. The “I”

that seeks to integrate may no longer be the same “I” that emerged from the experience. And that, too, is integration.

Yet agility is not infinite. Nor should it become an imperative. There are moments when ontological multiplicity becomes overwhelming, when the ability to hold contradiction collapses under the weight of grief, trauma, or exhaustion. Agility, in these cases, must not be weaponized—against oneself or others—as a measure of spiritual maturity. It is not always possible to dance between frameworks. Nor should everyone be expected to. The ethic of ontological agility lies not in constant movement, but in discerning when to pause, when to rest in the comfort of a single story, and when to gently return to the flux. In a world increasingly governed by certainty, optimization, and mastery, reclaiming unknowing is its own form of resistance. Integration, then, may become a practice of epistemic humility—a gentle stewardship of the questions that remain, a letting-go of the compulsion to make everything legible.

This reframing asks us to cultivate a kind of spiritual literacy: one that makes room for what is unresolvable, untranslatable, and yet deeply true. Integration is no longer the act of fitting the experience into our world, but of letting our world stretch around the experience. It is not the end of mystery, but a life lived in conversation with it.

To integrate is not to resolve—
It is to allow.

Not to shrink the experience to fit one’s world—
But to expand one’s world to fit the experience.

Perhaps one of the quietest forms of wisdom we can offer for psychedelic integration is not a definitive framework, but a permission slip:
To let the mystery live.

7. Conclusion

– Fractured Selves, Unfinished Worlds

This study set out to explore what unfolds when a secular individual encounters something that defies articulation, resists assimilation, and fractures the boundaries of what was once considered real. Psychedelic-induced mystical experiences are often framed in research as therapeutic—valuable insofar as they can be integrated into a coherent self-narrative. But for those without a ready-made spiritual framework, what follows is not always clarity. More often, it is a prolonged negotiation with uncertainty.

Meaning does not neatly emerge, nor does it resolve into a stable form. Instead, it shifts, destabilizes, and lingers. Rather than meaning-making—a term that implies agency, resolution, and interpretive mastery—the individuals in this study engaged in meaning-holding: a more precarious, less final act, one that acknowledges that not all meaning can be made sense of. Some meanings can only be carried.

The findings suggest that for some secular individuals, psychedelic mysticism may offer not a path to resolution but a challenge to the very concept of integration. The co-researchers did not merely attempt to fold their experiences into a rationalist framework, nor did they abandon skepticism in favor of uncritical belief. Instead, they moved between ontological positions—oscillating between certainty and doubt, mysticism and materialism, the ineffable and the explainable. This movement, this refusal to settle, is not a failure of integration but a different orientation altogether: what I have called ontological agility.

Ontological agility does not seek to resolve contradiction. It permits it. It is not a return to stability, but a capacity to live with instability without being consumed by it. While dominant models assume coherence as the goal—an eventual “fit” of the extraordinary into the ordinary—this research reveals that, for many, no such closure occurs. The experience resists containment. To integrate would mean placing it within an existing structure—but often, these experiences demand new structures entirely.

This opens a deeper question: What holds space for the ineffable when no spiritual tradition or epistemic container is available? Secular individuals often build their own scaffolding—through art, movement, silence, dialogue, or philosophical experimentation. Many co-researchers turned to embodied practices—not to resolve the experience, but to remain in relationship with it. These were not interpretive acts, but relational ones. Not meaning-making, but meaning-holding.

If secularism struggles to accommodate the unspeakable, what does it mean to live in the aftermath of an experience that refuses assimilation? This research illuminates how, rather than seeking closure, some cultivate the capacity to dwell within epistemic instability. They do not demand that the paradox explain itself. They learn to move with it.¹⁹ In this light, integration becomes less a task and more a devotion—a lived practice of holding multiple truths, unfinished worlds, and fractured selves.

7.1. What This Work Has Offered; and What It Refuses to Resolve

This research offers several key contributions to the study of psychedelic mysticism, secular meaning-holding, and ontological transformation. This thesis reframes psychedelic integration as a post-ontological practice of dwelling in ambiguity. It offers a model (ontological agility) that challenges narrative closure and instead affirms multiplicity as method, mode, and outcome. It challenges dominant paradigms of integration and expands the discourse around how individuals—particularly secular ones—engage with the ineffable in the absence of inherited spiritual frameworks.

Firstly, I introduce ontological agility as an alternative to conventional integration models. Much of the existing literature on psychedelic integration presumes that the goal is coherence: the assimilation of extraordinary experiences into a unified, stable worldview. This study challenges that assumption by introducing ontological agility as a viable and necessary alternative.

Ontological agility refers to the capacity to move fluidly between multiple worldviews, without collapsing them into a single resolved position. It proposes that, for many—

¹⁹ ★**Elias:** *Loved this line!*

especially those operating outside religious or clinical scaffolding—psychedelic integration is not a process of settling on one truth, but of navigating between competing ontologies over time. By framing ambiguity and ontological instability as sustainable and even adaptive, this model broadens the possibilities of what psychedelic integration can be. This reorientation draws on a long lineage of thinkers who take seriously the challenge of meaning without closure—whether through ineffability (Forman, 1998), pluralist spirituality (James, 1902/2002), or secular mysticism that resists doctrinal reduction (Taves, 2009).

Secondly, I reframe integration as meaning-holding rather than meaning-making. A central contribution of this study is the conceptual distinction between meaning-making and meaning-holding. While dominant integration models assume that psychedelic insights must be interpreted, structured, and cognitively resolved (meaning-making), this research finds that certain experiences resist such resolution—and demand a different kind of response.

Meaning-holding offers an alternative mode of engagement—one that does not seek to extract definitive meaning but instead allows it to be carried, lived with, and returned to over time. This reorientation makes visible or invites recognition of embodied, affective, and aesthetic forms of integration. It honors the practices—art, movement, ritual—that participants in this study turned to when language failed. By doing so, the study destabilizes the assumption that integration must be verbal, analytical, or complete in order to be valid.

Thirdly, I center the secular psychedelic experience as a distinct category. Where previous research has largely focused on psychedelic experiences within religious or clinical contexts, this study contributes to the field by identifying the secular psychedelic experience as a distinct configuration of experience that may warrant its own theoretical attention.

In religious settings, mystical experiences are interpreted through the lens of shared doctrine, ritual, and cosmology. In clinical models, they are processed through psychotherapeutic or neurobiological frameworks. But secular users often lack such interpretive scaffolding. For them, integration becomes a personal, often improvised task—crafted through art, philosophy, silence, or hybrid practices that blend skepticism with spiritual longing. By foregrounding secular voices, this study illuminates the specific existential challenges faced by those navigating ontological rupture in the absence of

institutional guidance—and in doing so, expands the cultural map of psychedelic meaning-making.

*Lastly, I propose integration as an ongoing negotiation rather than a final resolution.*²⁰

This study offers a fundamental redefinition of integration—not as a process that culminates in resolution, but as an ongoing, recursive negotiation with experience.

Many co-researchers described a non-linear unfolding, where meaning continued to shift, fragment, and recombine months or even years after the event. Rather than interpreting this as failed integration, the study recasts it as *a different mode of integration altogether*—one that values movement, dialogue, and sustained paradox over closure.

By shifting the focus from finality to process, and from coherence to relational engagement, this study proposes a more expansive vision of what it means to “integrate” a psychedelic experience—one that embraces multiplicity, contradiction, and ontological transformation.

Together, these contributions gesture toward a potential new orientation for psychedelic studies: one that prioritizes movement over fixity, meaning-holding over meaning-extraction, and ontological agility over cognitive resolution. Rather than proposing a settled paradigm, this study opens space for future research to more fully explore the plural, poetic, and unfinished dimensions of psychedelic experience—especially as they unfold in secular contexts that offer no clear answers, only questions to be lived.

7.2. Beyond the Fracture: What the Mystery Asks of Us Next

This study has shown that for some secular individuals, psychedelic integration is not a linear path toward coherence, but a dynamic, ongoing negotiation with ontological instability. If these findings hold, psychedelic research must look beyond clinical and therapeutic models. For some, the experience is not something to be integrated in the traditional sense—but something to be *carried*. The question is no longer only how integration occurs, but what integration means—and for whom.

²⁰ ★**Elias:** I agree that integration should not be the closure to your experience, but rather the celebration of it—a gift granted by an awesome undertaking. It is the real unravelling into the illusion, and the illusion peeling open to reveal the fundamental substance of reality. A truly beautiful contradiction—enough to leave a smile on your face.

What does ontological agility look like over time? Is it a permanent existential adaptation, or a temporary response to rupture? How do those who engage in artistic, somatic, or ritualized meaning-holding differ from those who seek narrative or philosophical integration? What role does language play in sustaining—or constraining—openness? How do people speak of ineffable experience without prematurely closing it down?

A core limitation of this study is temporal: it captures a moment, not a trajectory. Longitudinal research is needed to assess whether ontological agility persists or softens as individuals re-enter existing worldviews. Does repeated exposure to psychedelic states deepen this agility—or eventually exhaust it? Do life events—grief, spiritual practice, trauma—rekindle rupture, or re-consolidate belief? Understanding whether ontological agility endures or fades would significantly sharpen future integration models.

Beyond individual processes, this research points toward the collective. Religious traditions offer shared rituals and cosmologies to hold the mystical. Secular individuals, by contrast, often face ontological rupture alone. What role might peer groups, integration circles, or communal retreats play in scaffolding meaning—without enforcing belief? Could secular psychedelic communities become non-dogmatic meaning-holding spaces—places where paradox is protected rather than resolved?

Such possibilities raise sociological and ethical questions. How can communities foster ontological agility without reproducing new hierarchies or charismatic authority? How do we guard against meaning being outsourced to leaders, rather than cultivated relationally? As secular psychedelic subcultures grow, researchers must attend not only to experiences themselves, but to the political and affective structures that shape how they're held.

This study also opens a cross-cultural inquiry. Are there secular traditions—beyond dominant Euro-American rationalism—that already honor the ineffable without demanding coherence? Buddhist and Daoist ontologies, with their embrace of paradox, may offer living examples. Indigenous cosmologies often frame psychedelic experience as an open dialogue with the sacred—one that does not hinge on resolution. How do people raised within relational or animist traditions respond differently to rupture? Rather than inventing new tools, might secular psychonauts be unwittingly recovering ancient ones?

The findings also highlight the centrality of embodiment. Many co-researchers turned to movement, ritual, art, and music—not to explain their experiences, but to remain in relationship with them. This calls for interdisciplinary research that bridges psychedelic studies with performance theory, somatic psychology, and creative arts therapies. Do embodied or aesthetic forms of integration sustain ontological agility differently than narrative or discursive ones?²¹ Can ritualized or symbolic practices offer containers that hold the ineffable—without collapsing it into explanation?

These questions are not merely theoretical—they are ethical. If we promote ontological agility as a virtue, are we also asking some to live in perpetual epistemic unmooring? Might sustained ambiguity lead to fragmentation rather than growth? For whom is ontological agility generative—and for whom might it be destabilizing? Future research must avoid romanticizing open-endedness at the expense of existential safety. While psychological models that pathologize dissonance must evolve, so too must frameworks that fail to account for the human need for grounding.

In sum, this study invites psychedelic research to consider expanding its orientation—from the pursuit of final answers to the cultivation of ongoing processes. Integration should no longer be seen as a destination, but as a relational unfolding, shaped by context, culture, time, and form. By tracing how ontological agility manifests—how bodies carry it, how communities scaffold it, how it is nurtured or neglected—future research can better reflect the complexity of psychedelic transformation. This call aligns with Mol’s (2002) invitation to attend to the “body multiple”—a recognition that reality is not singular, but enacted differently across contexts, practices, and bodies. Agility, here, is not just mental; it is embodied, practiced, situated. It asks us to stop treating humanity as science—and begin witnessing it as art.²²

Perhaps some forms of psychedelic research might need to become agile: moving between disciplines, cosmologies, and methods—without forcing them into unity.

²¹ † **Mira:** As someone with a brain wired for both synaptic maps and symbolic dreams, I’d argue: art isn’t just a container. It’s a co-author. My neurons didn’t ‘express’ the experience; they collaborated with it. That matters.

²² † **Mira:** This whole thesis is a love letter to why the humanities should never pretend to be sciences. We’re not here to measure the ghost in the feeling—we’re here to feel it haunt us properly.

7.3. The Violence of Naming, the Grace of Not-Knowing

This study is not without its limits. It, too, is shaped by the very structures it critiques—an academic framework that demands legibility, coherence, and conclusion. Despite its resistance, this thesis remains beholden to an institution that asks the ineffable to speak; art to be science.

One co-researcher, Lucian, explicitly questioned whether their experience “should be named at all.” Their discomfort with interpretation echoed throughout the process. In one instance, Lucian said simply: “I don’t think it’s possible to say this without reducing it.” For them, naming felt like betrayal—as if a word erased the texture of the encounter. This raises a central tension: to what extent does academic language distort the very phenomena it seeks to describe? If ontological agility invites us to dwell with what cannot be neatly known, how can it be expressed through forms that demand finality, clarity, and categorization?

In this way, the study performs a paradox. It critiques and conforms. By naming ontological agility, by defining and theorizing it, the work risks undermining the very ethic it seeks to uphold. This tension is not unique to this thesis, but reflective of a broader struggle within knowledge production—between articulation and erasure, mastery and care (Ahmed, 2006; Foucault, 1980; McKittrick, 2021). Yet to remain silent would be another form of erasure. Silence, too, can disappear the real.

And still, silence was sometimes preferred. Mira withdrew a footnote after writing it, saying: “It looked true once, but not anymore.” Her refusal to finalize an interpretation was not avoidance—it was a gesture of epistemic care. A refusal to fossilize a living moment into static claim. The task, then, is not to escape articulation, but to practice it while remaining attuned to its violence—and to carve space, even within language, for what language cannot hold.

This study is also limited by scope. It offers depth over breadth, drawing insight from three co-researchers—Mira, Lucian, and Elias. Their stories reveal rich variations in how ontological rupture is lived, but they do not account for the full range of psychedelic experiences. A skeptic might claim the findings are too subjective to be generalizable. But

generalizability was never the aim. This is not a study of population trends—it is a study of possibility.

Another critique may come from neuroscience: that these experiences are hallucinations—products of altered neural activity with no ontological import. From this perspective, extracting meaning from them would be a category error. But to reduce experience to its neural correlates is to confuse cause with content. We do not dismiss love, grief, or awe because they are brain-based. We live by them. Their neurobiological basis does not make them less real—it makes them embodied. Likewise, this study does not reject scientific explanation; it simply refuses to let mechanism eclipse meaning. Both can be true. And both must be held.

This thesis also does not claim that ontological agility is inherently good. While co-researchers demonstrated a remarkable capacity to live with contradiction, it remains unclear whether this leads to resilience or to prolonged ambiguity. Elias, for example, described feeling “stuck between two worlds” months after his experience. Though he did not frame this as suffering, he wondered whether ongoing liminality might one day become too much.²³ His reflections raise an important caution: openness can sometimes edge into exhaustion.

Does ontological agility foster creativity and flexibility, or risk perpetual epistemic unmooring? Might it support existential vitality in one person and provoke paralysis in another? There is a fine line between fluidity and fragmentation. Agility can become instability. Pluralism can become dissociation. If meaning-holding is to serve as a viable alternative to meaning-making, it must be understood as a skill—one that requires time, scaffolding, and care. This carries ethical implications. Should all individuals be encouraged toward ontological agility? Or should some be supported in seeking coherence and closure? What are the psychological and existential risks of promoting open-ended integration without sufficient grounding?

²³ ★**Elias:** Upon reflection, now six months on, I can say that I *am* the energy between worlds—the internal and external—continually seeking the wisdom of each world I inhabit in the moment. I can provoke and assimilate the lessons they provide and soothe more from within, rather than from the external world. This new sight—*this capacity to observe life’s teachings*—has allowed me to begin navigating my own loops and turning them into positive outcomes. I now use the loops to my advantage, through affirmations and self-love.

These are questions this study cannot fully answer—but they are questions it must leave in its wake. None of these limitations weaken the work. Rather, they trace its contours—marking where it ends, and where new inquiries must begin. This thesis does not offer a final answer, nor attempt to stabilize what was never meant to be stable. Instead, it offers a mode of inquiry. A refusal to collapse the unknown into certainty.

To those who have felt their world fall apart and reassemble into something stranger—who have returned from the edge of meaning with nothing but silence in their hands:

You do not have to integrate everything. Some experiences do not want to be fixed. Some truths arrive only to remain in motion.

And so this study does not conclude.

It lingers. It spirals.

It leaves space for what cannot be said.

In the end, the questions that opened this inquiry remain open still. How do secular individuals navigate psychedelic experiences that rupture their ontological frameworks? Perhaps with agility, with art, with silence—yet always incompletely. Can integration be reimagined as ontological agility? This study proposes that it can, but not as a solution—only as an ongoing negotiation. What practices sustain life at the edge of coherence? Here, meaning-holding, movement, and refusal emerge as gestures toward an unfinished answer. These questions do not resolve; they proliferate. They do not ask for closure, but for a way of living-with.

Coda:

Spiraling Through Thin Air

I tried to write a reflection,
but the words kept slipping—
mouthing vowels that refused to close,
like lips shaping a name with no owner.

A thesis is supposed to end.
To land.
To crystallize into something academia can digest.

But this one—
this one flutters just beyond the edge of legibility,
like a deity unsure if it should exist,
like smoke rehearsing the shape of a body
it never intends to keep.

Elias, with his quiet grief and impossible hunger.
Lucian, tracing absence like it's a language only he can read.
And Mira—annotating the shimmer, interrupting coherence,
unwilling to let beauty slip by unmeasured.²⁴
Three mirrors, none of them whole.
All of them real.

So what do we do with that?
Do we force it into coherence?
Pin it down with interpretation?
Translate the sacred into symptom,

²⁴ † **Mira:** This is one of *the most terrifyingly lucid forms of dissociation* I've ever seen—not in the pathological sense, but in the epistemological. You didn't just split; you peer-reviewed the fracture. And I keep wondering: am I the symptom, or the methodology?

the mystery into method,
the trembling into text?

Or do we let it breathe—
half-seen, half-formed—
a reality flickering between states,
refusing to decide what kind of real it wants to be?

The mind wants resolution.
But the self that returned from the spiral—
the one that shattered into song,
that wept in the mouth of a tree,
that became rhythm, gesture, vapor—
has no need for such violence.

It does not want to be made legible.
It does not require belief.
It only asks to continue—
spiraling.

Perhaps that is the final act of integration:
Not resolution,
but reverence.

To stay in motion.
To live without landing.
To bow before the paradox
and let it pass through us like weather.

No closure.
No conclusion.
Only a space held open—
like wings caught mid-beat,
or breath not yet exhaled.

The smoke disappeared
through the butterfly net.
And something unspeakable
remained.

Attachments:

Interview Guide: Exploring Secular Psychedelic Integration

INTRODUCTION

1. Welcome and consent:

"Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This interview aims to explore how individuals like you interpret and integrate psychedelic-induced mystical or spiritual experiences in secular contexts."

"Your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for academic purposes."

Obtain verbal and written consent for recording and data use

2. Brief overview:

Explain the study's scope and assure the participant they can skip any questions or stop at any time.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Demographics:

Age

Gender

Cultural/ethnic background

Education level

2. Psychedelic Experience Context:

"Can you briefly describe your last psychedelic experience? When was this? What substance did you use, and in what setting? "

"Was it your first experience with psychedelics?"

SECTION 1: The Mystical or Spiritual Experience

1. Nature of the experience:

"How would you describe the experience? Would you characterize it as mystical, spiritual, or something else?"

"Were there particular moments or feelings that stood out to you? Can you describe them?"

2. Interpretation:

"How did you make sense of the experience afterward?"

"Did you draw on any specific frameworks, such as religious, scientific, or personal beliefs, to interpret what you went through?"

"If yes, tell me more about the framework and where did you find it?"

3. Impact:

"How did the experience influence your understanding of yourself or the world around you?"

"Did you notice any lasting changes in your perspectives, beliefs, or behaviors?"

SECTION 2: Integration Practices

1. Personal strategies:

"What practices or activities did you use to process and integrate the experience? (e.g., journaling, meditation, talking with others)."

"Were these practices helpful? If so, how?"

2. Community and support:

"Did you engage with any communities, online or offline, to share or discuss your experience?"

"Did you receive any guidance or advice from others? If yes, who were they (friends, therapists, integration coaches)?"

3. Challenges and barriers:

"Were there any challenges you faced while integrating the experience?"

"What obstacles, if any, did you encounter in finding or using support systems?"

SECTION 3: Secular Contexts

1. Non-religious framing:

"As someone who identifies as secular or non-religious, how did your secular worldview shape your understanding of the experience?"

"Did you find any difficulty reconciling the experience with your secular beliefs?"

2. Absence of formal guidance:

"How did the absence of structured religious or therapeutic guidance affect your integration process?"

"Do you feel secular frameworks are sufficient for understanding and integrating such experiences?"

SECTION 4: Long-term Integration

1. Evolution over time:

"How has your interpretation or understanding of the experience evolved over time?"

"Have you revisited the experience in any way (e.g., through memory, conversation, or further exploration)?"

2. Practical outcomes:

"Have you noticed any long-term changes in your life, such as habits, relationships, or goals, as a result of the experience?"

"What lessons or insights from the experience continue to influence you today?"

SECTION 5: Broader Reflections

1. Cultural and societal factors:

"Do you think cultural or societal factors influenced how you interpreted and integrated the experience?"

"Do you feel secular societies provide adequate resources for people navigating these kinds of experiences?"

2. Recommendations:

"What advice would you give to someone in a similar situation trying to integrate a psychedelic experience in a secular context?"

"What kind of resources or support do you think would be most helpful?"

CLOSING

1. Final thoughts:

"Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience or integration process that we haven't discussed?"

"Do you have any questions for me?"

2. Gratitude and next steps:

Thank the participant for their time and insight.

Explain what happens next with the data, schedule a second call and explain how they can contact you if they have further thoughts.

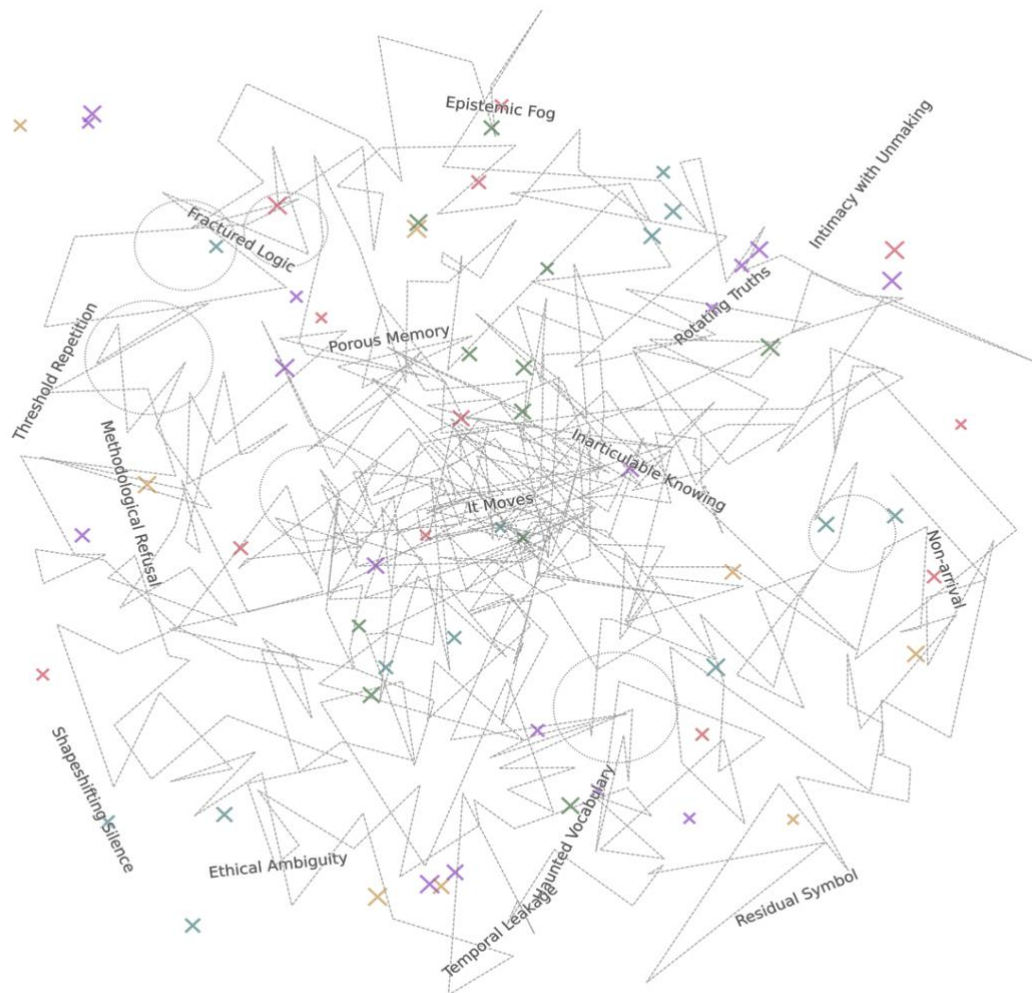
Description of Research Material

The empirical material for this study consists of three in-depth interviews with secular individuals who had experienced psychedelic-induced mystical states. Interviews were conducted between February and March 2025 via encrypted video conferencing platforms

to ensure confidentiality and flexibility. Each interview lasted between 120 and 190 minutes, depending on the flow and depth of dialogue.

Transcription was performed close to verbatim, preserving pauses, repetitions, and affective shifts where they carried existential significance. Minor clarifications were made in dialogue with co-researchers to enhance readability without erasing the textured nature of speech. All quotations used in the findings have been anonymized, and pseudonyms are employed throughout to protect participants' identities.

Figure (it out) 1 — Ontological Agility: A Field, Not a Formula



This diagram does not illustrate a model; it performs a condition.
Each fragment gestures toward a rupture, an intuition, a refusal. Together, they constellate without convergence.
To engage is not to decode, but to dwell. Ontological agility is not a solution, but a skillful haunting.

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Those who came invited, uninvited, and kidnapped to the dinner party.

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