

Hoffer Interview Put to Acid Test

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It was with interest that I read an article on Dr. Abram Hoffer in the last issue of The Fifth Estate [FE #13, August 30, 1966]. As a medical researcher on LSD I have had the occasion to refer to Dr. Hoffer's work many times and hold the greatest respect for him as a competent scientific investigator.

As a human being, however, I have also had the occasion to refer to the work of Timothy Leary many times and hold the greatest respect for him as a competent philosophical investigator.

My purpose in writing is to attempt to straighten out one of the most popular misconceptions surrounding the teachings of Timothy Leary. This the idea that LSD is to be "exploited freely and made readily available for anyone to take at any time with no controls or safety measures. This is absurd! Leary readily admits that LSD should be taken only under very rigid conditions and he sets high standards of safety in his requirements for the "guide."

It is Leary's contention that the safety and precautions should come not from a bottle of Thorazine or from Dr. Hoffer's miraculous nicotinic acid, but rather from the compassion, understanding and empathy of a fellow human being.

I don't think anyone would argue with this intention of Leary's, but most wonder about its efficacy. It is here that I may be able to shed some light by virtue of personal observation.

I have watched as people were given LSD in hospital surroundings and I have seen their terror grow as they realized they were getting more than they bargained for. Some were comforted by the blood pressure cuff and white-jacketed figures. They said later that they felt they were in the hands of people who understood all this and this feeling lessened their terror.

Others, however, have stared out from the hospital window and wondered whether it wouldn't be nicer to be out there...in the park...

In spite of the diversity of reactions to LSD in a clinical setting there was a common thread running through the majority of post-LSD interviews: "Would you like to do it again?" The great majority of subjects answered "yes," but when questioned as to-how they would do it they agreed almost unanimously that they would not want to be in a hospital room the next time they took LSD. Some conditioned this by saying that they would like a doctor around even though they didn't want to be in a hospital.

I have also watched as people were taking LSD in huge park or wooded areas and in their own homes, as the sounds and smells of the hospital were replaced by incense, fresh flowers, Ravi Shankar and readings from the Bardo Thodol.

They too have felt the terror, for the terror is a part of LSD. Yet most of these people seemed more prepared for what they experienced. The wise ones defended against the terror by living it fully and understanding it was part of them. The others became entangled in the same defense mechanisms which we employ so well in our everyday neuroses.

I don't mean to imply that all or even most of the LSD experience is terror, but to varying degrees this is a part of it and this is the part causing all the concern. This is the part of LSD that sends people to emergency rooms sobbing uncontrollably and muttering that they are insane. This is the part that has caused the one or two recorded suicides.

To deny that this part exists is to bury your head in the ground, but to assume that the only way to cope with it is a hospital setting and an available bottle of Thorazine is equally ridiculous. A trusted and competent “guide” can do far more than an uncomprehending doctor and his powerful phenothiazines. That we can live the terror and learn from it is a lesson that has been learned by anyone who has taken LSD more than once.

If some object to my use of the word “terror” then I apologize for it, but it is my personal way of describing the first experience of being unable to test reality, of no longer being sure of one’s existence, of becoming lost in the cosmic switchboard of time-space-reality warp. If these expressions are more meaningful then substitute them for “terror,” but recognize that when they are experienced for the first time they, almost of necessity, do elicit terror.

Recognize also that it is possible to be guided through this experience with the very minimum of fear or terror. It is to the minimizing of this “terror” (my word again.) and the maximizing of the ecstasy (ex-stasis) that Timothy Leary has devoted his investigations.

It is this about Leary that I think many fail to understand. I have heard him referred to as “playing the Leary game” or his work referred to as “just mysticism” and not having any validity for modern intellectuals. To me this is nonsense. Certainly Leary is game playing. He admits to playing the biggest game of all. Take your choice, the Leary game or the modern medicine game. My point here is that each has its place. Leary has developed a method for guiding people through a temporary psychosis.” It has worked in too many cases to reject it completely.

Medicine too has developed its LSD games. We have the Thorazine game and the interview game which is being used by Hoffer and some psychoanalysts around the country. Are these any more valid than the Leary game? In the last analysis this must be a matter of personal choice, but please don’t cling too tenaciously to the scientific method. It is as yet too new in the history of man. Its impact is undeniable, but its validity and overall effect will have to be judged by generations far in the future.

The preparation that Leary offers and the guidance he proposes in many ways makes more sense than the scientific method of bringing the subject in without any foreknowledge, giving him 150 micrograms intravenously and letting him stew in his own mental nightmare as I have seen more than once. Of course, Leary and medicine have different goals when they administer the drug.

I would hasten to add that LSD cannot be taken lightly. It is a potent drug that we are only beginning to understand and the long range effects of it are only being guessed at.

Young people taking LSD to get high are in for a rude awakening. They are playing with fire and don’t realize it. The doctors who are giving the drug experimentally are beginning to see that it is changing the course of lives in many cases.

More and more LSD psychoses are being seen in hospital emergency rooms. Remember, they don’t go out looking for the LSD taker—he is coming to them and he is frightened. In my opinion this is due to the rising use of LSD among people who have no idea what it is or what it can do. They are the people who take it with no preparation and they surround their session with people who understand even less than they do.

Here then is where Timothy Leary comes into his own. He offers a system of guidance—tested advice for the traveler of inner space.



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