



Essay

Acid liberalism: Silicon Valley's enlightened technocrats, and the legalization of psychedelics

Maxim Tvorun-Dunn*

University of Tokyo, Department of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, Tokyo, Japan



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ABSTRACT

The history of psychedelia within the New Left counterculture often implies a cultural alignment between psychedelics and progressive values or the promise of radical communitarian social reform. In contrast to these potentials, this paper examines Silicon Valley's engagement with psychedelics, a community which has demonstrated considerable financial and personal interests in these drugs despite promoting and advancing consistently neoliberal ends. This article studies Silicon Valley's culture of psychedelic drug use through extensive analysis of published interviews by tech industrialists, news reports, and recent studies on the tech industry's proliferation of mystical and utopian rhetoric. This work finds that psychedelics and their associated practices are given unconventional mystical meanings by some high-profile tech entrepreneurs, and that these meanings are integrated into belief systems and philosophies which are explicitly anti-democratic, individualist, and essentialist. It is argued that these mystical ideas are supported by a venture capital community which profits from the expression of disruptive utopian beliefs. These beliefs, when held by the extremely wealthy, have effects on legalization policy and the ways which psychedelics are commercialized within a legal marketplace. As Silicon Valley has put considerable resources into funding research and advocacy for psychedelics, I argue that the legalization of psychedelics will likely be operationalized to generate a near-monopoly on the market and promote further inequality in the United States that is reflective of both neoliberalism, and the essentialist beliefs of Silicon Valley functionaries.

Introduction

This paper responds to Plesa and Petranker's (2022) July issue call of this journal for more critical engagement with the political-economic factors of psychedelic legalization. As these authors note, research on psychedelics is at an all-time high; with most of it positive, finding low risks, increased wellbeing, and boldly claiming classic psychedelics generate pro-social attitudes, progressive beliefs, and environmental awareness (Bright et al. 2021; Erritzoe et al. 2019; Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017; Gordon, 2022; Kettner et al. 2021; Kirkham & Letheby, 2022; Noorani et al. 2018; Paterniti, Bright, & Gringart, 2022; Netzband et al. 2020). What occasional criticism there is has remained primarily within the clinical sphere, examining potential negative health effects and dangers of youth consumption (Bates & Trujillo, 2021; Malcolm & Thomas, 2021; Nayak et al. 2021; Pisano et al. 2017). Despite the massive increase in research on psychedelics, only three studies so far have critically approached the political-economic concerns of legalization (Gearin & Devenot, 2021; Pace & Devenot, 2021; Plesa & Petranker, 2022). As Plesa and Petranker (2022) state, "what is more critical than the risks associated with using psychedelics are the risks

associated with *how* psychedelics are being used" (p.1), by commercial enterprises and neoliberal actors. This essay contributes to this through a study of the cultures and motivations of drug use in Silicon Valley, which has substantially funded a portion of research and legislation efforts towards psychedelics. Several researchers emphasize subjective interpretations of psychedelic experiences as capable of generating deeply held personal and social meanings (Fischman, 2019; Hearn, 2021; Johns, 2022); it is therefore worth examining what social narratives and interpretations are being prescribed to these drugs by actors who have funded psychedelic research and advocacy.

This object of study is not only relevant due to the tech sector's active investment towards psychedelics, but also due to the Valley's visible culture of psychedelic drug use. As seen among the several authors who have charted the history of the San Francisco Bay Area, most notably Roszak (1969), Barbrook and Cameron (1995), and Turner (2006, 2009), there is a direct continuity from the counterculture of the sixties, and its psychedelic associations, towards the rise of the contemporary tech industry; with major industry founders such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates having used lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) (Gates and Rensin, 1994; Isaacson, 2011, p.41). Considering that Silicon Valley has

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: maximtvtd@g.ecc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

directly contributed to the crystallization of neoliberalism (Lax, 2001), significant pollution of the environment (Evans, 2011; Stewart, Bacon, & Burke, 2014), disempowerment of labor unions and workers' rights (Crandall, Brown, and McMahon, 2021, p.854; Gray & Suri, 2019), and development of the surveillance state (Levine, 2018), the continued prominence of psychedelic drug use by tech executives seems directly incongruous with the pro-social, progressive forming, and environmental attributes which advocates claim psychedelics provide. In this regard this article builds from Pace and Devenot's (2021) recent study on the incongruity between psychedelia's pro-social claims and the existence of right-wing individuals who use drugs (see also Dean & Zamora, 2021).

While the mere existence of this incongruity demonstrates, as Barilan (2015) argues, that "the enhancement of morally relevant capacities is not identical to moral enhancement" (p.79), the demonstrated pro-social potential of psychedelic drugs by contemporary researchers is not something to dismiss outright. Psychedelic usage has long been culturally presented as having potential to help society shift beyond the vices of contemporary capitalism (Zimmerman, 2006). The counter-culture, while ambivalent in its real-world effects, remains associated with a rebellion against commercialism and state violence (Duff, 2016, p. 1610). As Fisher (2018) argues, there is a compelling connection between psychedelia and social activism that, under the right conditions, is something to foster. In his introduction to *Acid Communism*, left unfinished by his suicide in 2017, Fisher theorizes psychedelics and psychedelic media offered a refusal of, "the bourgeois gaze which measured life in terms of success in business" (p.759). To Fisher, psychedelia "exposes the bizarreness, the inconsistency, of what [institutions] had been taken for common sense" (p.762), and that this combined with psychedelics associations with collective outwardly love, offers revolutionary potential towards new forms of social organization. These themes are expanded upon by Lucia (2020) who describes, "transformational festivals [and their associated spaces of psychedelic drug use] create the experience of *communitas* across an ideological commons, building collective will to form new utopias" (p.187), with the potential for carnivalesque recognitions of societal inequality. This communal potential for social improvement is reflected in Kavanaugh and Anderson's (2008) research, finding increased solidarity among MDMA users. Indeed, the best examples of psychedelic art, found in the music of The Beatles and Pink Floyd, on film in *Hair* (Forman, 1979) and *Bacurau* (Filho & Dornelles, 2019), and in the games *Disco Elysium* (Kurvitz, 2019) and *Cruelty Squad* (Kallio, 2021), offer post-structuralist critiques of the institutions under which society is bound and against which to mobilize collective action.

If the legalization of psychedelic drugs is promoted under their potential to foster pro-social effects; the incongruity between these potentials and their current use by industrial magnates makes clear that future policies of legalization must actively foster social improvements, and that intense scrutiny should be placed upon the commercial interests and motivations involved in psychedelics.

This paper first examines the cultural contexts of Silicon Valley's drug use, the efforts towards research and legislation funded by tech sector actors, and the meanings and motivations which these actors ascribe to their use and investments in psychedelics. I argue that, for Silicon Valley's elite, the use of these drugs is prominently expressed within an enterprise of transhumanism that seeks to guide utopian forms of human advancement via bio-technical and pharmacological means. Following scholars Asprem (2020) and French (2022), I theorize transhumanism as reflective of structures of secular-esoteric beliefs (beliefs which do not fit conventional religious or scientific structures) in their mutual "desire for perfect knowledge, with the acquisition of special powers, and the elevation of the individual" (Asprem, 2020, p. 398). Furthermore, I argue through transhumanism's ideologues that these beliefs are inherently undemocratic and essentialist, and that the public expressions of these utopian ideas are backed by a venture capital market that profits from the expression of mystical thinking (Geiger, 2020). Ultimately this paper predicts that legalization efforts funded through these venture-backed

entrepreneurs will lead to near-monopolized commercialization of the psychedelic industry, and serve to generate further inequality reflective of both neoliberalism and these essentialist mystical beliefs.

Silicon Valley, psychedelic use and investments

From Steve Jobs describing LSD as "one of the most important things in my life" to the 1990s cyberdelic writings of Timothy Leary and Terrence McKenna, psychedelic use and counterculture ideologues have been deeply intertwined with the origins of the tech industry and the information superhighway (Dery, 1996; Duff, 2016; Isaacson, 2011, p.41; Szabo, 2021; Zandbergen, 2011, 2012). Reflected culturally in Linklater's (2006), Cronenberg's (1983, 1986), and the Wachowskis' (1999) films about chemically and technologically altered states, tech and drugs have since the sixties been ingrained within one another. In critically approaching the tech industry's personal and financial investments into psychedelics, this section examines scholarly and journalistic reports of tech industry drug use, the financial connections between the tech sector and the growing psychedelics market, and the prevalence of psychedelics and associated practices among specific Valley executives. While this study is centered on the Bay Area, Silicon Valley is known to exist outside of itself, and additional examples are taken on occasion from the broader sphere of the tech industry.

While no formal survey has empirically examined Silicon Valley drug consumption, abounding studies and accounts posit that psychedelics form a key part of tech industry identity. Scholars Lucia (2020), Crandall, Brown, and McMahon (2021), Zandbergen (2012), as well as journalists Marantz (2019), Kuchler (2017), Lybarger (2015), Leonard (2015), and Swisher (2018) present numerous examples of psychedelic usage by high-profile tech executives, alongside expensive mystical Esalen Institute retreats, Burning Man visits, and ayahuasca tourism. Turner (2009) examined the transformation of Burning Man (a festival culturally associated with drug consumption) into a core part of Google management culture, as more and more executives use the experience as a networking opportunity, and ticket prices grow exponentially higher.

Furnishing this integration of drug culture with tech culture, numerous scholars have provided articles on psychedelics' potential ties to technology: theorizing and testing psychedelics applications in Virtual Reality, Artificial Intelligence, and Blockchain tech (Aday, Davoili, & Bloesch 2020; Glowacki et al. 2022; Knowles 2019; Sekula & Pusanathan 2022; Smart 2015). Similar research has also examined the possibilities of drugs in assisting capital accumulation, such as examining psychedelic microdosing effects on labor-relevant traits (Anderson et al. 2019; Prochazkova et al. 2018; Rifkin & Colzato 2020), and the role recreational drugs can play in improving entrepreneurial abilities (Warnick et al. 2021).

In addition to this published research in psychedelic technologies and workplace practices, Silicon Valley has invested significant capital into the research and commercialization of psychedelics. Compass Pathways, the largest firm in the psychedelics industry, has received considerable funding by tech investors Lars Wilde and George Goldsmith, and from entrepreneurs Christian Angermayer, Micheal Novogratz, and Peter Thiel (Bloomberg, 2020; Osgood, 2021; Plesa and Petranker, 2022). Pathways has attracted criticism for its attempts in monopolizing the industry and patenting psilocybin mushroom strains (Goldhill, 2018; McDaniel, 2021).

Peter Thiel also founded his own psychedelic firm ATAI Life Sciences that is valued at over two billion dollars (Henning, 2021). Entrepreneur Joe Green has raised \$30 million for psychedelic research organization MAPS (Osgood, 2021), GoDaddy founder Bob Parsons has donated over \$6 million to various institutions, and billionaires Steven Cohen and Tim Ferris, alongside Matt Mullenweg and Blake Mycoskie donated a combined \$17 million to the building of the Johns Hopkins Center on Psychedelic and Consciousness Research (Yackowicz, 2022b). Numerous psychedelic-related startups

have been forming in the Bay Area, many of which have attempted to integrate data-harvesting digital apps into psychedelic consumption (Osgood, 2021; Plesa and Petranker, 2022). As positive results from research will fast-track these companies' abilities to bring their services to market, several tech firms have directly funded research. Compass Pathways has acquired FDA approval for their own research on ketamine (Yakowicz, 2022a), and CaaMTech has raised \$22 million, partnering with the University of Wyoming for researching its products (Curry, 2022). Knowles (2019) also notes donations from the cryptocurrency sector, "have substantially contributed to the funding of psychedelic research into therapeutic applications" (p.21). Thus research, both public and private, can be understood to play an active role in developing opportunities for Silicon Valley to exploit.

Efforts towards legislation have also been substantially funded and engaged with by the tech industry. New Approach PAC, the lobbying body which advocated for medical legalization of psilocybin in Colorado and Oregon, has received substantial recent funding from the tech sector, with top contributors including Privateer Holdings – which owns the cannabis website Leafly (OpenSecrets, 2022), as well as Cari Tuna – wife of a Facebook founder, and Sean Parker – the founder of Napster and president of Facebook (Rashidian, 2020). Osgood (2021) notes Compass Pathways' involvements in legalization efforts, with critics accusing the firm, "of trying to 'mobilize opposition' to [a proposed mode of Oregon] legalization so Compass could have greater control of the market by being the only one offering the service [of psychedelic therapy]." The local Denver advocacy organization SPORE recognized the corporate implications of these activities, criticizing tech funded advocacy as: "A whole bunch of white men behind closed doors making big decisions that are impacting communities of color, Indigenous communities and legacy workers." (Walker, 2022). This is a concern acknowledged by Thrul and Garcia-Romeu (2021) who note that regardless of how effective psychedelics may be in therapy there is a disparity in both research-on and access-to these treatments for non-white communities.

Some openly acknowledged psychedelic users in the tech industry include Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, John Gilmore, Stewart Brand, venture capitalists Tim Ferris and Bob Parsons, cryptocurrency investors Michael Novogratz and Christian Angermayer, Mirror AI founder Serge Faguet, and VR innovator Brenda Laurel (Brand, 2016; Ferris & Novogratz, 2020; Ferris and Rose 2021; Gates and Rensin, 1994; Isaacson, 2011, p.41; Laurel & Weaver, 2017, p.24; Marsh, 2018; Miller & Gilmore, 2021; Pendleton, 2021; Yakowicz, 2022b). In a quote with *CNN Business*, Tim Ferris states "the billionaires I know, almost without exception, use hallucinogens on a regular basis" (Fink, 2015). Elon Musk, while not admitting to taking the drugs himself, has expressed "people should be open to psychedelics" (Musk & Swisher, 2021), frequently speaks of "expanding the light of consciousness" (Crandall, Brown, McMahon, 2021, p. 849), and has implied prior experience with dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in a 2020 twitter thread reading, "Laws of thermodynamics: 1. You can't win 2. You can't break even 3. You can't stop playing... Unless you're on DMT." Several firms offer psychedelic experiences and retreats marketed towards tech executives, such as *Entrepreneurs Awakening*, which promotes \$11,000 ayahuasca retreats as "Psychedelic-assisted Executive Coaching for Business Leaders" (*Entrepreneurs Awakening*, 2022; Robinson, 2016).

For some, like Mirror AI founder Serge Faguet, psychedelic drugs are used under the project of 'biohacking' as a means of incrementally improving oneself through technology and pharmacology, combining a battery of vitamins, supplements, and the microdosing of psychedelics as a means to prolong one's life and optimize desired characteristics (Marsh, 2018). This rhetoric is prevalent throughout corporate spaces of psychedelics, such as the aforementioned *Entrepreneurs Awakening*, whose CEO describes their offerings as "a total hack" (Robinson, 2016). Similarly, a conference on technology and psychedelics titled *Awakened Futures* was hosted by a firm named "Consciousness Hacking" (Ellis, 2019).

Spirituality, psychedelics, and transhumanism

The founder of Consciousness Hacking, Mikey Siegel, has also been a faculty member of the Esalen Institute (Esalen, 2022): a North Californian meditation facility whose board of trustees abounds with major tech industry executives (Marantz 2019), and which offers workshops on psychedelics (Esalen 2019). Ties between the Silicon Valley meditation industry and drug use may offer some explanation for the prevalence of psychedelic advocacy in the tech sector (see Chen 2022). Simonsson and Goldberg (2022) found a motivation for both psychedelic consumption and meditation was "enlightenment" (p.4). Similarly, Consciousness Hacking claims to use its ties between tech, psychedelics, and meditation to "facilitate a path towards higher consciousness, self-realization, awakening, and transcendence" (Esalen, 2018).

This transcendental motivation can be seen reflected in the actions of Twitter founder Jack Dorsey, who has not publicly expressed experiences with psychedelics but frames his meditative activities along very similar lines to what psychedelic ideologues like Leary (1964) and McKenna (1992) argue these drugs provide. In 2018 Dorsey, to much attention, attended a 10-day *vipassana* retreat in Myanmar (Dorsey, 2018). In a YouTube interview about this experience, he elaborates on his motivations for meditation, stating: "I think it [Twitter] represents the global consciousness, I think it's the closest thing we have to tapping into a global consciousness... and I inherently believe that we have that power internally," further stating that meditation helps to achieve "a point where I can experience and feel... those moments of instinct" (Rich Roll, 2019, 1:52:50). For Dorsey then, it appears meditation serves to provide insight into a supposed 'global consciousness' which exists not simply as a metaphor for interactions between global social network users, but is an inherently accessible plane within the individual.

This description of global consciousness appears similar to those offered in New Age spiritualities, which Horowitz (2019) argues are characterized by a "syncretic search, transcendental yearning, and belief in expanded human awareness" (p.213). Within Silicon Valley, Aupers (2003) finds New Age rhetoric prominently expressed throughout its discourse and cultural products. This New Age belief in transcendental awareness can be fruitfully read as a gnostic one (Horowitz, 2019). The Gnostics, as a formal religion, were an ancient heretical branch of Christianity which believed in a higher level of reality (gnosis) beyond the realm of human experience, and that enlightened individuals who could achieve visions of this reality were necessary to guide humanity in optimal directions (Barilan, 2015). To describe New Age-adjacent beliefs as gnostic is of course not to imply that Silicon Valley transcendentalists are a shadowy cabal of ancient heretics, but is to use the term to specify a structure of esoteric beliefs about higher consciousness which parallel those held by some key tech industrialists, such as Dorsey, or Elon Musk who ascribes to a *Matrix*-like 'simulation theory,' stating "the odds we are in base reality is one in billions" (in Goldhill, 2016).

This can be thought of more conventionally in a Weberian sense; akin to Crandall, Brown, and McMahon's (2021) findings that Silicon Valley's use of utopian, humanity-saving rhetoric offered re-enchantment in labor; predicating workers' motivations on the magical thinking that their actions guide the world towards a utopia. Cook (2019) asserts that Valley employees believe themselves to be "meritocratic, problem-solving, and social justice driven" (p.15), and Lucia (2020) finds that affluent-white spiritual meditative communities use "internal self-transformation as the primary agent of social change" (p.5). If the upper echelons of tech executives include a culture of spiritual meditation (see Marantz 2019; Chen 2022), then this re-enchanting enlightenment seems to motivate social change through self-transformation. This may account for the wide consumption of psychedelic drugs, which are popularly claimed to "provide direct access to and experience of mystical wisdom (gnosis)" (Shipley, 2015, p.2), and that this wisdom motivates (at least superficial) social change (Lucia, 2020). This rhetoric is expounded in contemporary discourse on psychedelics, which claims that

internal self-transformation will somehow contribute to solving climate change (Petersen, 2020; Wisdom 2.0, 2019), or the expressly ahistorical suggestion by researchers Roseman et al. (2021) that psychedelics could resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Introducing spirituality into executives' lifestyles re-enchants individuals towards using their investments and working opportunities to attain or shape this gnosis of the world. As Dorsey states on the topic of internal global consciousness, "anything that builds self-awareness, any practice, any tool, any object is something I want to invest in" (Rich Roll, 2019). This supposed enlightenment driving tech 'visionaries' is frequently infused into discourse that sees Silicon Valley elites as "saviors of humanity's future" (Crandall, Brown, McMahon, 2021, p.843).

If gnostic achievement, expressed through meditation and psychedelics, appears a driving factor for the investments of some tech elite, then what kind of gnosis this resembles should be examined, as tech investments currently hold undue power over all other human society. Aspreem (2020) and French (2022) offer insight into the mystical thinking espoused in Silicon Valley. They present the Valley's popularly discussed rhetoric in transhumanism: the belief that the human body can be advanced artificially to something beyond itself, transcending at a utopian point into a godlike state in which "the entire universe will become saturated with our intelligence" (Kurzweil cited in French, 2022, p.25). These authors note the obvious religiosity of these claims, and importantly, that mystical transhumanists don't comprise of "figure[s] at the fringes of Silicon Valley, but... influential leader[s] at the heart of one of our days' most powerful industries" (Aspreem, 2020, p.401).

Contemporary transhumanist discourse is primarily funded and platformed through the major tech-tied think tank Singularity University – founded by Peter Thiel and Ray Kurzweil (Vance, 2010; Singularity Group, 2019; Aspreem 2020). Named after Kurzweil's utopian prediction of the moment of superintelligence ('the singularity'), this think tank promotes a variety of transhumanist endeavors such as AI, psychedelics, biohacking, and space travel. With venture capitalists like Peter Thiel both dominating the psychedelics industry and deeply invested in transhumanist movements, how psychedelics align with other transhumanist efforts is worth examining, in order to predict the ways that their commercialization might mirror other transhumanist tech efforts.

The psychedelic writings of Leary and McKenna reflect much of transhumanist discourse connecting consciousness-expansion rhetoric with space travel, such as Elon Musk's rhetoric of "extend[ing] the light of consciousness to the stars" (Crandall, Brown, and McMahon, 2021, p.850). Leary writes "Space Migration offers our unfinished species the opportunity to create new realities, new habitats, new neural perspectives, new worlds unlimited by territorial longitudes or gravitational chauvinisms" (cited in Regis, 1990, p.65). In a statement even more parallel to the accelerationism and utopian end goals of transhumanist discourse, McKenna (1992) describes:

All of human history appears as preparation for human transcendence of planetary existence... We are not going [to an interplanetary future] as 1950s-style human beings; we are going to have to transform our minds before we are going to be able to leave the planet... This is where I think psychedelics come in, because they are anticipations of the future... the [psychedelic] experience is really that of a prophetic dimension – a glimpse of the potential of the far centuries of the future through these compounds (pp.157-158).

These ties between transhuman integration with space travel (such as those implied in Musk's founding of both a private space agency, SpaceX, and an invasive neural implant project, Neuralink) and psychedelic experiences are not merely parallel, but are, according to Pilsch (2017), core beliefs of the ideology: "This tropic treatment of human consciousness [expressed by Leary and Cosmic Consciousness author R.M. Bucke (1901)] ... has long been central to evolutionary futurist rhetoric" (p.35). Pilsch further notes that the similar writings of Russian Cos-

mist Ouspensky reflect the "mystical impulses at the core of transhuman thought" (p.42); a connection also noted by Tutton (2021), who argues Silicon Valley's goals of immortality through space travel and transhuman improvement are the same as those expounded in Cosmism (p.431). In this regard then, McKenna's claim that "this is where... psychedelics come in" is a prescient one. Psychedelic drugs, for Silicon Valley's tech elite, appear used for the belief that they either directly play a role in, or offer a glimpse of, the transhuman cosmology of consciousness-expansion, and are therefore promoted by affluent transhumanist organizations like the Singularity University and their network of tech billionaires.

The practice of biohacking expressed by Faguet demonstrates an instance of psychedelics operationalized within transhuman endeavors. Faguet (2017) explicitly states that his goal is "to help make us immortal posthuman gods that cast off the limits of our biology, and spread across the Universe. To have limitless abundance." Additionally, he asserts "to have permanently enhanced his intelligence by taking a massive 900-1,000mcg dose of LSD" (Marsh, 2018). Peter Thiel appears another particularly noticeable integration of psychedelics in transhumanism, investing in them alongside his bid to extend human lifespan through blood transfusions from younger individuals (Crandall, Brown, McMahon, 2021). These practices of biohacking are promoted by Singularity University itself, with "bio-hacking" listed alongside "longevity & biotech" in a scrolling array of topics that their executive-program promises to discuss (Singularity Group, 2022).

Gnosis, psychedelia, and anti-humanism

Barilan (2015) argues that the transhumanist rhetoric of guiding humanity through neural enhancements is a specifically gnostic one: that transhumanists and Gnostics both hold "worldly life as a kind of dark imprisonment in need of redemptive enlightenment... Without salvation or enlightenment... we are unfit for the future—worldly and otherworldly alike... Salvation depends on liberation from the corrupt part of human existence. This liberation is achievable by means of spiritual-moral enlightenment" (p.76). The concern however is that Gnosticism and its transhumanist contemporary inherently follow a, "division of humanity into the unelected and the enlightened" (p.77), and the choice of who may be enlightened is an explicitly undemocratic one.

The two most influential transhumanist authors, Ray Kurzweil and Nick Bostrom, regularly take anti-democratic positions in their writings, and both these authors are popular among industry barons (Aspreem, 2020, p.401; Goldhill, 2016). Kurzweil, in *The Singularity is Near* (2005), is opposed to government regulation of any form. Taking the position that accelerationist technologies will inherently be more positive than negative, Kurzweil argues that government regulation is both morally wrong, and simply futile as accelerationists must, and will, do whatever they please to help society their own way – even if a publicly elected government wishes otherwise (p. 336-338). This can be seen in the statements of Faguet, who directly threatened capital flight if legislation would not move his way (Marsh 2018). Nick Bostrom argues for greater mass surveillance to prevent cataclysms arising from wayward individuals (Bendix, 2019). In his work titled "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?" (Bostrom, 2003), which Goldhill (2016) claims to have established Musk's simulationist beliefs, Bostrom argues that the development of further simulated consciousnesses are dependent entirely on the will and wealth of individuals (p.10-11). At no point is it considered whether a civilization would democratically contribute to such an endeavor, rather he concludes it unlikely that further simulations would be made because most societies do not have "wealthy individuals who desire to run ancestor-simulations and are free to do so" (p.14), implying perhaps that it is a pity enterprising individuals would not be free due to constraints from the masses. As Elon Musk has made the adjacent task of inventing artificial intelligence an apparent goal of his, founding OpenAI in 2015, Bostrom's framing that this quest may only be achieved through the capital accumulation of individuals

mirrors Musk's actions. As [Crandall, Brown, and McMahon \(2021\)](#) quote Musk, he claims that his massive hoarding of capital is "accumulating resources to help make life multiplanetary & extend the light of consciousness to the stars" (p.850).

Kurzweil's and Bostrom's positions that enterprising wealthy individuals are necessary for achieving utopian gains for humanity which must not be stopped by democratic masses, places these entrepreneurs into Barilan's gnostic framework. With psychedelia read as a transhumanist tool, its accumulation by Compass Pathways, who journalists accuse of monopolizing the industry ([Goldhill, 2018](#); [McDaniel, 2021](#)), forms just another resource in a transhumanist endeavor that is ideologically dependent on monopolistic control by a dedicated enlightened elite. Psychedelics have been claimed to offer moral enhancement and pro-social values, yet as Barilan argues, such rhetoric of moral enhancement is dependent on distinguishing the morality of the enlightened as good, as opposed to the potentially bad morality of the unenlightened. The transhumanist notion to use psychedelics as moral enhancers is prevalent among psychedelic researchers, such as [Gordon \(2022\)](#) who argues psychedelics should be integrated with AI to improve human capacity, and the necessity in promoting trust between the enhancer and enhancee; a frankly dystopian suggestion considering the corporate actors who fund these efforts. After all, Peter Thiel, who funds Compass Pathways in addition to founding the Singularity University, also founded the firm Palantir: a global surveillance and military intelligence platform ([Woodman, 2017](#)). To promote psychedelics' integration as commercial or therapeutic services offered by private institutions with little oversight and a vague and undemocratic goal of improving human capacity is to relegate further commercial power to a consolidated elite who see themselves, and not others, as those who must guide our lives.

[Chiles, Crawford, and Elias \(2021\)](#) offer a saint-like theorization of entrepreneurial spirituality and imagination, that while disturbing in its implications, appears to accurately capture the beliefs that tech entrepreneurs like Jack Dorsey hold, and the meanings which psychedelics and meditation contribute for them. Approaching the themes of inner worlds and becoming godlike in entrepreneurial discourse, they state:

God is neither "up there" in the heavenly ether nor "out there" in the natural universe, but rather "in here," residing in each of us in the form of imagination. Through this immanent divine force, entrepreneurs envision and actively create new ideas that challenge current thinking, new products that upset existing markets, or, more dramatically, new worlds that supplant old ones. (p.5)

These authors also explicitly recommend psychedelics as a means of achieving this divine imagination. While their openly religious perspective of the entrepreneur indulges in unverifiable mystical claims, and their analysis remains entirely uncritical towards spirituality in business, their research provides a well-argued account that spirituality and mystical thinking does in fact directly inform and motivate many successful entrepreneurs, much like Dorsey and Faguet, and their saintly language used reflects that which is often ascribed to industrialists ([Crandall, Brown, McMahon, 2021](#)).

This is supported by [Ganzin, Islam, and Suddabey's \(2020\)](#) finding that Canadian entrepreneurs viewed themselves through a "transcendent" spiritual framework. They found that the entrepreneurs they interviewed believed that "the transcendent individual can gain insight into the order of the world and the role prescribed for their success... the individual entrepreneur locates him-or herself in the cosmology and follows the 'path' to success" (p.93).

This 'path' described above reflects the anti-democratic essentialism which powerful entrepreneurs share, such as those within the Singularity University network. The entrepreneurs discussed seem to believe there is a distinct gnostic order to the world which they must form upon society in order to achieve the godlike or the utopian; regardless of when these actions are disruptive of millions of human lives or not supported by public opinion. Despite transhumanism's claims that humanity will become as gods, or Musk's rhetoric of expanding the 'light

of consciousness,' these efforts are entirely anti-humanist. For all their praise and apparent appreciation for consciousness, there seems a callous disregard for the conscious lived experiences of the many low-level employees whose rights are revoked to develop these technologies ([Sonnemaker, 2021](#)), and the millions whose access to jobs and healthcare are cut off in the process ([Schlogl & Sumner, 2020](#); see also [Hobsbawm, 1952](#)).

[Chiles, Crawford, and Elias's \(2021\)](#) blatant praise of entrepreneurial spirituality also reveals the dangers that placing faith in enlightened 'visionaries' has against democracy and social welfare. They claim, for example, that "[Steve] Jobs relied on raw emotions and intuitive feelings to imagine wildly innovative products. (p.10). But this claim is outwardly not the full truth. Rather, what Steve Jobs relied on was publicly funded research, which his firm would use to monopolize and consolidate sectors of the emerging tech industry and was then able to avoid paying taxes on ([Mazzucato, 2011](#)). Esoteric spirituality – and the psychedelic, yogic, and transhuman practices with which it is associated – do inform and motivate entrepreneurs' activities, but in ways which are explicitly closed to public interests.

Even as psychedelics become legalized for the masses, their spirituality, which these authors claim have helped endow entrepreneurs with divine vision, will, under Compass Pathways' already monopolizing market, offer those below only participatory access to this vision. This process is akin to Facebook's performance of transparency: Facebook offers users a sense of community control through quantified 'transparency data,' yet these users, in fact, have no democratic power whatsoever in Facebook's decision making ([de Matos Alves, 2019](#)).

Increasingly, important elements of our lives, from healthcare access, to information, to even once-transgressive recreational drugs are being consolidated into the hands of a private elite, who actively fund legislation and deregulation efforts which serve their interests. Rule that is based upon divine vision is antithetical to socially-equitable, democratic, and supportive social structures, and intentionally protected against through the separation of Church and State. The fact that the most affluent and increasingly powerful men (invariably white men) in the world seem motivated by, profit from, and act upon beliefs which hold such parallelism with esotericism ought to ring alarm bells that the tech industry has become akin to a contemporary church-state.

Transhumanist neoliberalism, and its consequences

Admittedly, this connection between tech entrepreneurialism and esotericism may initially seem unintuitive: firstly, the objectivist rationalism and continued scientific innovation of the tech sector is seemingly at odds with mystical and unverifiable beliefs. However as [French \(2022\)](#) demonstrates in his examination of The Temple of The People in Halcyon, California, there is a long history of successful and innovative Valley tech magnates directly associated with esoteric religions (see also [Berdayes, 2015](#)). A second seemingly incongruous theme comes from the claim that neoliberal capitalism functions above ideologies and beliefs; the ideology that the market will regulate itself irrespective of the personal religions of its users. Yet, in [Geiger's \(2020\)](#) examination of the Valley's utopian disruption narratives, mysticism and magical thinking are, to use the parlance of the Valley, a feature – not a bug. He argues that these fanciful claims function primarily in provoking disruption in the market as investors scour to adapt to what potential changes will be made as accelerationist companies pursue these elaborate schemes; powered by "a venture capital community that sees vast riches to be gained... even if the revolution never comes to be" (p. 179). In this regard the mystical consciousness-expanding rhetoric deployed by Valley elite directly serves a venture capital market that profits from the mystical and utopian.

It is for this disruptive capitalist potential that even those who have not publicly expressed mystical transhumanist beliefs, actively align themselves with, and market towards groups who do. Such is the case of entrepreneur and early psilocybin investor Tim Ferris, who oper-

ates a podcast which has on multiple occasions invited speakers on psychedelics and promoted writers on immortality (Ferris, 2017; Ferris & Grof, 2018; Ferris & Novogratz, 2020; Ferris & Stamets, 2018); additionally, he has authored *The 4-Hour Body: An Uncommon Guide to Rapid Fat-Loss, Incredible Sex, and Becoming Superhuman* (Ferris, 2010). A more cynical example is billionaire Patri Freidman (2009), who in his manifesto/investor-pitch for libertarian boat-faring city-states, notes that groups who would be potentially interested in the project include psychedelic drug users and transhumanists (p. 220, 269). Friedman has also winked towards these associations in a tweet in May 2022 promoting books on Eastern religion about “cultivating true essence... to become an immortal and attain godhood.” Regardless of if these individuals themselves integrate psychedelics into mystical and transhumanist beliefs, they actively cultivate audiences who do.

The transhumanist narrative is one which directly contributes to wealth and power consolidation. If psychedelics are to be integrated into this narrative of improving human potential, publicly marketed in terms of therapeutic gains, and internally marketed as enhancing oneself and providing gnosis, then within this narrative it must be consolidated into the tech capitals so it may be more directly integrated with other transhumanist projects such as space travel, artificial intelligence, and neural uploads. Compass Pathways’ alleged monopolization efforts are not only accumulating capital for financial ends. With its core funders so intertwined with transhumanist organizations like Singularity University, it functions within a transhumanist accumulation of resources for proposed utopian ends. Even if those who truly believe in transhuman potential are only the most vocal and affluent minority, expressions of these beliefs guide the flow of capital westwards. While the motivating beliefs may be esoteric and ineffable, they function neatly within a neoliberal system which accommodates whatever keeps the money flowing superficially, as it gradually pools into the Bay.

Implications

Recognizing that Silicon Valley’s wildly utopian claims are more in service of moving capital than designed to ever come to fruition leaves uneasy implications on the emerging psychedelics market. Psychedelic start-ups and researchers suggest that these drugs can solve everything from addiction to PTSD (Sullivan, 2022), to climate change and the Israel-Palestine conflict (Petersen, 2020), on top of science-fiction-like goals of integration with artificial intelligence. Yet psychedelics are not a cure-all, and the extreme claims and commercial interests surrounding advocacy risks repeating the mistakes of Prozac and OxyContin (Healy, 2004; Zee, 2009). A commercialized drug economy is one antithetical to effective and critical research (Bowling et al. 2020; Plesa and Petranker, 2022). Orellana (2014) notes that political economic systems in which power is consolidated by a homogeneous elite are more likely to advocate for policies which appear as “quick fixes” (p.6) rather than nuanced policy considerations. Silicon Valley appears ideologically and practically intent on monopolization, and California is next slated to receive statewide medical legalization of psilocybin through the tech-funded New Approach PAC. Legalization in California may then lead to sub-par or ineffective quick-fix services offered without any out-of-state competition able to arise against a consolidated industry.

The adoption of psychedelia as a service provided by the tech industry, rather than within other markets, brings with it the downsides that all tech industry expansions bring. As Plesa and Petranker (2022; see also Noorani, 2021) note, several startups have integrated data harvesting apps into psychedelic consumption, building the new therapeutic and recreational psychedelic markets into yet another facet of the surveillance economy. Seeking to cut back labor expenses, these startups are racing to digitize the role of therapists and in the process replace them with rigid, under-researched, and potentially ineffective or poorly designed apps (Noorani 2021). With such unethical practices inherently more profitable, and with Silicon Valley capital able to under-

cut any competition, venture backed firms acting on the whims of transhumanist elite will have free reign over the commercial applications of psychedelics.

There is additional concern on the effects which legalization of classic psychedelics may have on gentrification. As De Voorde, Slack, and Barton (2021) found of the decriminalization of marijuana in Denver, the introduction of licit drug dispensaries into communities can lead to gentrification as young, affluent professionals move into the region attracted by the availability of legal and now socially-acceptable drugs. With psychedelics primarily used by affluent white demographics (Jahn et al. 2021; Jones & Nock, 2022, p.68), this effect will likely be exacerbated. As the financialization of the psychedelic market is likely to raise prices (Basak & Pavlova, 2016), the disparity between psychedelics proposed benefits and access to those benefits by non-white and marginalized communities will increase (see Thrul & Garcia-Romeu, 2021). The sense of moral enlightenment among some psychedelics users also risks further marginalizing and stigmatizing people who use other drugs (see Lucia, 2020, p. 135).

Advocates of psychedelics assert their morally-enhancing potential, as in Chiles, Crawford, and Elias (2021) who claim these drugs may instigate “love, as a core organization value,” and bring firms to address “the grand challenges of our time” (p.11). Yet as this study, as well as Pace and Devenot’s (2021) work has shown, there is an incongruity in the reality that despite Silicon Valley’s many negative effects, many of the world’s most powerful men were already dropping acid from the very start. No matter how thoughtfully loving they may be, interior vision is not a substitute for critical theory, history, sociology, or any specialized information relevant to a society’s many necessary fields (Petersen, 2020). Silicon Valley remains committed to ‘helping the world’ only through engineering and the stock market. These solutions, when imposed upon other fields are inherently and intentionally destabilizing and impractical. The best-case scenario of psychedelics radically altering the entrepreneurial mindset would be the promotion of social-entrepreneurship; an endeavor which Trajano et al. (2022) argue is fostered by pro-social attitudes. Yet, as Pirson (2012) demonstrates, unless a social enterprise is bankrolled externally, the necessity of profit in a neoliberal system will inherently leave the organization’s social goals unfulfilled. Further, if the social enterprise is reliant on bankrolling to conduct its activities, it is then left to be “hand-picked” by neoliberal actors who will select an organization which best suit their interests, becoming instrumental in further “cement[ing] neoliberalism as a mode of governance” (Kreitmeyer, 2019, p.289).

Religious and spiritual freedom is a deeply beneficial right of the American First Amendment and should be upheld in all policy considerations. The concern here is not of the beliefs of some psychedelic users in themselves, but that these beliefs, when held by a homogeneous group of powerful industry leaders, are used in ways that motivate their substantial funding towards research and advocacy of psychedelics; and that this dominance over both the psychedelic industry and the information sector will lead to modes of legislation and commercialization that ingrain structures which are socially unequal and anti-democratic. Gnostic-transhumanism, as found in Leary and Chiles, Crawford, and Elias, seems set on the generation of new worlds that replace the present, but these new worlds are both not intended to actually develop realized utopias, and are structured entirely around essentialist and undemocratic philosophy. The social inequality consistently seen in the tech industry’s motivations, actions, and results, mean that greater inequality will be fostered by tech funded advocacy and research. The potential socially advancing elements of psychedelics are already being recuperated into a neoliberal system. This can be seen in both the commercialization of the middle-class self-help market (Webb, Copes, & Hendricks, 2019; Plesa & Petranker, 2022), and, with multiple legislative councils touting these drugs based on their ability to help military veterans (DeLauro, 2021, p.162; Wiener, 2021), their adoption into the military-industrial complex.

Some authors continue to tout the pro-social effects of psychedelics via the optimistic history of the New Left counterculture, promising that psychedelics can play a role in genuine social reform. However appealing or even possible this may be in a radical setting, the technocratic structures which are being developed and advocated for by the tech industry will only further ingrain the current status quo. The elitist and essentialist actors providing funding, the rigid data-harvesting digital spaces which startups are preparing to offer, the eager willingness by researchers to buy into techno-fetishist dreams of privately controlled cyberdelics, the financialization of drug distribution, the demonstrated interest in psychedelics by the environmentally destructive cryptocurrency sector, and the ineffective neoliberal rhetoric that personal improvements will save the world, all paint a very different picture of the 'psychedelic renaissance.'

As Fisher (2018) argued, if psychedelics are to be used to improve society, then these social aims must be actively and collectively fought for through radically social efforts which are democratic to all, without the investment of the information industry guiding change. If policies are to be reformed to provide intersectional improvements to society, then the benefits, both financial and legal, must have opportunity to be deployed in a truly intersectional manner – not only relegated to wealthy entrepreneurs providing monopolized services to primarily affluent-white customers. The legalization of psychedelics is rapidly underway, and with commercial actors dominating its processes, urgent policy recommendations are needed to prevent monopolization and further inequalities in America.

Ethics approval

The authors declare that the work reported herein did not require ethics approval because it did not involve animal or human participation.

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Declarations of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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