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HOW AM I NOT MYSELF? Psychedelic Experience and the Phenomenology of Individuality

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1. Introduction

I felt a tremendous rush of energy fill my head [...]. Terror seized me – and then, like one of those flimsy wooden houses erected on Bikini Atoll to be blown up in the nuclear tests, “I” was no more, blasted to a confetti cloud by an explosive force. I could no longer locate [myself] in my head, because it had exploded that too, expanding to become all that there was. Whatever this was, it was not a hallucination. A hallucination implies a reality and a point of reference and an entity to have it. None of those things remained [Pollan 2018, 276-277].

This report, from M. Pollan recounts his experience with the fast-acting psychedelic 5-MeO-DMT. Similar accounts appear in other reports. For instance, A. Huxley writes: «I spent several minutes – or was it several centuries? – not merely gazing at those bamboo legs, but actually being them-or rather being myself in them; or, to be still more accurate (for “I” was not involved in the case, nor in a certain sense were “they”) being my Not-self in the Not-self which was the chair» [1954, 10]. For S. Grof ego-dissolution is «an ecstatic-state, characterized by the loss of boundaries between the subjective and the objective world, with ensuing feelings of unity with other people, nature, the entire Universe, and God» [1980, 79]. Additionally, in analyses of user reports [Millière 2017; Nour *et al.*, 2016], participants reported similar experiences of ego-dissolution. These reports underscore that ego-dissolution is not merely a loss but often a revelation of deeper unity. Such experiences are not entirely exceptional in the canon of psychedelic effects. Variations on this theme appear across substances, continents, and decades. What is exceptional is the paradox it presents: the most radical seeming loss of self in the current scientific literature is simultaneously capable of being vividly described. If there is no self then how is there an experience which the self can relate after the fact?

Contemporary neuroscience has an answer ready: what dissolves is the ordinary «self-model», a high-level predictive representation generated by the Default-Mode Network (DMN) and relaxed under 5-HT_{2A} agonism. What remains is at most a minimal phenomenal self – a thin, contentless for-me-ness that itself, they claim, reduces to the most basic mechanisms of hierarchical inference [Letheby 2021; Millière 2018; Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019]. On this view, psychedelic ego-dissolution is the controlled experimental demonstration that the self, as ordinarily experienced, is merely a useful fiction.

Yet often the experiencers insist that what is revealed is not less self but more; not the absence of personhood but a deeper stratum of what it means to be human [Nour *et al.*, 2016; Lebedev *et al.*, 2015; Millière 2017]. The white light is not experienced as a neural epiphenomenon but as the ground of being knowing itself. The boundless ocean is not a predictive error signal the remainder once the ego falls away. These are not post-hoc rationalizations; they are the immediate, first-person datum.

This article sides with the experiencers against the dominant reductive reading by retrieving a largely ignored current within phenomenology itself: the realist phenomenology of personhood developed by M. Scheler, E. Stein, R. Ingarden, and their Munich-Göttingen contemporaries. Against both transcendental idealism and post-structuralist dissolution, these thinkers defended a layered, non-essentialist, yet irreducibly real conception of the individual as a psychophysical, affectively structured, temporally extended unity. Individuality, for them, is neither a metaphysical substance nor a predictive fiction; it is a dynamic achievement whose strata can be selectively disclosed or concealed.

The central claim of this paper is that psychedelic ego-dissolution functions as a privileged limit case for testing and vindicating precisely this stratified ontology. By developing a tripartite distinction between (1) the self as psychophysical totality, (2) the ego as narrative-reflective identity, and (3) for-me-ness as pre-reflective givenness, I will show that what psychedelics temporarily suspend is only the second, historically informed layer. The deeper layers, the vital-affective stratum and the inalienable horizon of first-personal givenness, do not dissolve; they become more salient in proportion to the silencing of the narrative ego.

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 1 presents the strongest neurocognitive accounts of ego-dissolution and identifies their philosophical limits. Section 2 traces the historical shift from substantial to layered conceptions of individuality within phenomenology. Section 3 articulates the tripartite framework in detail. Section 4 analyses a graded series of first-person reports, mapping each onto the proposed layers. Section 5 demonstrates the striking fit between these phenomena and the realist ontologies of Scheler, Stein, and Ingarden. Section 6 answers the most pressing objections. The conclusion draws out the broader implications for the phenomenological philosophy of personhood.

If the analysis is successful, the psychedelic experience will emerge not as the refutation of the self but as one of the most powerful disclosures of its layered reality which is available to philosophical reflection.

2. Neurocognitive Accounts of Ego-Dissolution and their Philosophical Limits

The past decade has witnessed an explosion of neuroscientific research on psychedelics, driven in large part by clinical trials demonstrating their therapeutic potential and by sophisticated theoretical models aiming to explain their characteristic effects. Central to these effects is the phenomenon researchers term «ego-dissolution». This concept refers to the temporary loss of the ordinary sense of being a bounded, narratively coherent self which is located inside a body and separated from the world.

A prominent explanatory framework in psychedelic research is the «Relaxation of Beliefs Under Psychedelics» (REBUS) model developed by R. Carhart-Harris and K. Friston [Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019], though other models exist. For instance, a review by J.J. Gattuso *et al.* [2023] synthesizes evidence showing that classical psychedelics (like LSD, psilocybin and ayahuasca) reliably alter the brain's Default Mode Network (DMN) - a set of regions involved in self-referential thought and mind-wandering. Across studies, psychedelics acutely decrease functional connectivity within the DMN while increasing connectivity between other large-scale networks, a pattern linked with altered consciousness (including ego dissolution) and changes in cognitive processing. These neural effects may underlie some therapeutic outcomes in conditions such as depression and anxiety, though the exact causal role of DMN modulation in clinical benefits remains unclear. Additionally, M. van Elk and D.B. Yaden [2022] call for a pluralistic causation framework, viewing psychedelics' effects as interplay among biochemical (e.g., 5-HT_{2A} agonism and neuroplasticity), neural (e.g., relaxed priors and increased complexity), and psychological (e.g., expectancy and meaning enhancement) mechanisms.

REBUS is arguably the most discussed and utilized framework so it is this approach that I will focus on in this paper. Building on predictive-processing theories of brain function, REBUS proposes that classical psychedelics (psilocybin, LSD, DMT) primarily act as 5-HT_{2A} receptor agonists that disrupt the precision-weighting of high-level priors. In ordinary cognition, top-down priors strongly constrain bottom-up sensory signals, producing a stable, hierarchi-

cally organized model of self and world. Under psychedelics, these high-level priors are relaxed or «anarchically» downregulated, allowing lower-level sensory information to propagate upwards with less top-down inhibition. The result is a cascade of altered brain dynamics: increased entropy, reduced DMN integrity, and the collapse of familiar self-boundaries.

Within this framework, the self is interpreted as a high-level generative model – a «controlled hallucination» that the brain constructs to minimize prediction error across multiple scales [Limanowski & Friston 2020]. The apparent unity and persistence of the egoic self is the product of strong priors that bind interoceptive, proprioceptive, exteroceptive, and autobiographical information into a coherent «I». When these binding priors are relaxed, the self-model literally «unbinds». What remains is either a fragmented multiplicity of sub-personal processes or, in the limit case of complete dissolution, a minimal phenomenal field devoid of any structured self-representation.

Philosophically, this picture has been developed most rigorously by C. Letheby and P. Gerrans [Letheby & Gerrans 2017; Letheby 2021]. They argue that psychedelic ego-dissolution provides direct experiential evidence for the «self-unbinding» hypothesis: the ordinary sense of self is a transient, constructed representation rather than an enduring entity. Letheby explicitly frames this as an epistemic opportunity. By temporarily removing the veil of narrative selfhood, psychedelics reveal the self to be «unbound»: a useful fiction that can be dispensed with without existential loss. What persists in the most profound states is at most a «minimal phenomenal self», a thin, contentless for-me-ness that is itself reducible to the basic mechanisms of predictive binding at lower hierarchical levels.

R. Millière has offered the most fine-grained taxonomy of self-consciousness compatible with this paradigm [2017; 2018]. He distinguishes several dimensions of self-representation that can be independently disrupted: bodily self-location, first-person perspective, narrative identity, and minimal phenomenal selfhood. Millière concedes that even in «complete» ego-dissolution (as measured by scales such as the Ego-Dissolution Inventory or the MEQ30), a residual for-me-ness typically remains. However, he interprets this residue naturalistically: it is the thinnest layer of predictive self-modelling, the baseline subject-ob-

ject structure required for any experience to be consciously registered at all. There is no ontological surplus beyond the mechanisms described by predictive processing.

These accounts are empirically impressive. Neuroimaging studies consistently show dose-dependent correlations between ego-dissolution scores and reduced DMN activity, increased global connectivity, and decreased modular segregation [Carhart-Harris *et al.* 2016; Muthukumaraswamy *et al.* 2013]. Psychometric instruments such as the Ego-Dissolution Inventory (EDI) [Nour *et al.* 2016] and the Mystical Experience Questionnaire reliably track the subjective intensity of self-loss across substances and populations. The REBUS model has genuine predictive and explanatory power. Nevertheless, three serious philosophical limitations remain.

First, these models systematically conflate the narrative-psychological ego with selfhood *tout court*. When researchers claim that «the self dissolves», they almost invariably mean the autobiographical, diachronic, socially embedded self. These notions are precisely the layer that predictive hierarchies most plausibly construct. Yet even their own data shows that something more primitive survives: a non-narrative, non-egoic, yet unmistakably first-personal givenness. By treating this remainder as merely the thinnest self-model, they risk reducing the very dimension they purport to explain.

Second, predictive-processing accounts remain stubbornly sub-personal. They excel at explaining how certain neural dynamics correlate with certain phenomenal reports, but they offer no resources for understanding why the persisting for-me-ness feels ontologically deeper rather than merely computationally thinner. Experiencers do not describe the residue of complete dissolution as a faint or degraded self-representation; they describe it as luminous, boundless, or «more real than real». The felt depth and qualitative weight of this minimal awareness resists translation into the language of prediction-error minimization.

Third, and most crucially, these frameworks tacitly assume that any adequate theory of the self must be exhausted by third-person mechanistic explanation. The persistence of first-personal structures even under radical neurochemical perturbation is treated as a curiosity to be naturalized away rather than as a phenomenon that might demand a richer ontology. Neurocognitive models have no language

for this claim beyond dismissive gestures toward «mystical ideology» or cognitive bias.

In short, while predictive-processing and self-model theories illuminate crucial mechanisms of ego-dissolution, they stop precisely where phenomenology begins. To grasp what psychedelic states actually disclose about the structure of individuality, we need a framework that takes the first-person givenness of experience as irreducible data rather than as a high-level hallucination awaiting sub-personal explanation.

3. From the Substantial Subject to Layered Conceptions of Individuality in Phenomenology

Modern philosophy arguably began with the attempt to secure an indubitable foundation for knowledge in the self. R. Descartes located that foundation in a substantial soul whose essence is thinking; Kant relocated it in the transcendental unity of apperception that must accompany all representations; E. Husserl, in turn, identified the pure ego as the identical pole of all lived experiences. In each case, individuality appears as something simple, self-identical, and metaphysically basic: a substance, a condition of possibility, or an absolute given.

The twentieth century largely dismantled this picture. M. Heidegger replaced the Cartesian subject with *Dasein*, an essentially worldly being whose existence precedes any substantial essence. J.-P. Sartre radicalized the point: consciousness is a nothingness whose only identity is the perpetual negation of thinghood. M. Merleau-Ponty dissolved the ego into the workings of the lived body, while French post-structuralism (M. Foucault, G. Deleuze, J. Derrida) completed the dissolution by treating the subject as a contingent effect of discourse, power, or impersonal flows of desire. By the end of the century, the very notion of a real, enduring individual seemed philosophically disreputable as either a metaphysical relic or an ideological fiction.

Yet within phenomenology itself, there was and is resistance to this slide into eliminativism. Within the Munich and Göttingen circles, a distinctly realist current insisted that the human person is neither a transcendental condition nor a mere construct but a concrete,

living unity disclosed in and through affective and embodied experience [Scheler 1973a; Stein 1989; Reinach 1989]. Unlike Husserl's later transcendental idealism, these thinkers refused to bracket the real existence of the person; unlike Heidegger's existential analytic, they refused to reduce personhood to factual thrownness. Instead, they developed an ontology of the individual as an emergent yet irreducibly real center of acts, feelings, and values situated within a material and intersubjective world.

In *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* Scheler argues that the person is not a substantial thing lying behind its acts but the unified executor of those acts themselves. The person is given only in its act-performance and cannot be objectified without ceasing to be experienced as person [Scheler 1973b]. At the same time, the person is not a mere logical postulate or empty pole: it possesses an individuality that is felt in the qualitative uniqueness of its value-ceptions and emotional life. The human individual is thus neither an empty transcendental subject nor a bundle of psychological states but a concrete, qualitatively unique center of lived experience rooted in embodiment and affectivity.

Stein extends this realism in a decisively intersubjective direction. In *On the Problem of Empathy* and her later *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, she shows that the lived body (*Leib*) is the zero-point of orientation from which the foreign psyche of the other is first given as foreign-yet-analogous [Stein 1989, 38-89]. Individuality is therefore not originally solitary; it constitutes itself in and through the empathic encounter with other lived bodies. The person is a psycho-physical-spiritual unity whose individuality is inseparable from its openness to a shared world of values and others.

Ingarden develops a rigorously stratified ontology in *The Controversy over the Existence of the World*. Real individuals exhibit layered structures (material, organic, psychic), with higher strata existentially founded upon but irreducible to lower ones. The human person is thus an ontologically composite being whose unity arises from determinate structures of foundedness and formal cohesion rather than from a simply posited substantial soul. While higher strata depend on lower ones, their disruption does not entail the destruction of the underlying material or organic layers.

What unites these realist phenomenologists is a conception of individuality as emergent, relational, affectively structured, and temporally extended without being either an eternal substance or an eliminativist fiction. The person is real, but its reality is dynamic and layered rather than simple and self-identical. This framework proves uniquely suited to the psychedelic case, where higher strata of selfhood (narrative identity, reflective agency) can be radically disrupted while deeper strata (vital feeling, pre-reflective givenness) remain and are often experienced with heightened intensity.

It is this realist, non-reductive, yet non-essentialist conception of the person that the present article seeks to retrieve and deploy. Psychedelic ego-dissolution does not reveal the self to be a mere predictive model. Rather, it functions as a controlled ontological experiment that temporarily suspends certain strata of individuality while leaving others intact, thereby disclosing the layered structure that ordinary consciousness habitually conceals.

4. A Tripartite Phenomenological Framework of Selfhood

To interpret what psychedelic states actually reveal rather than what neurocognitive models assume they must reveal, we need a descriptive framework that respects the full depth of first-person evidence. The following tripartite distinction is not an ad-hoc construction but a systematic articulation of structures already implicit in phenomenological realism.

4.1 The Self as Psychophysical Totality

The broadest and most concrete layer is the self understood as the living, psychophysical individual in its full ontological density. This is the human being as an embodied, temporally extended, ecologically and historically situated whole. Realist phenomenologists insist that the person is never a pure spirit or a disembodied consciousness but a unity of *Leib* and *Körper*, of lived body and physical organism.

Scheler speaks of the person as the «concrete and essential unity of being of acts of different essences which in itself precedes all es-

sential act-differences» [Scheler 1973b, 383]. The lived body is not an object among others; it is the indispensable carrier of all spiritual acts and the primordial field of vital feelings. Stein deepens this insight by showing that the lived body is given as a «zero-point of orientation» and as the seat of a sensuous-affective life that cannot be derived from purely psychic or spiritual acts [Stein 1989, 41–59]. Ingarden, finally, describes the human individual as a stratified formation whose lowest strata are material and vital; without these strata the higher psychic and personal strata would lack existential support [2013].

In ordinary experience this psychophysical totality remains largely in the background. We ordinarily live from it without a second thought. Under the influence of psychedelics, however, it frequently comes to the foreground in a dramatic fashion: the body is felt as a vibrating energy field, as an oceanic continuum, or as a porous boundary dissolving into the surrounding world. These are not hallucinations in the pejorative sense; they are the felt disclosures of the vital-affective stratum that is normally covered over by the pragmatic concerns of narrative and reflective self-experience.

4.2 The Ego as Narrative-Reflective Identity

At a higher, more articulated level stands what is commonly called the ego: the autobiographical, diachronic, socially constituted self that maintains psychological continuity across time. This is the self of memory, life-story, personal projects, and social roles. It is the self that answers to a proper name and recognizes itself in the mirror of past and future.

The ego in the usual psychological sense belongs to the sphere of the psychic life and can become an object of reflection. It is the objectified self, comprising character traits, habitual tendencies, and inner states, that we encounter when we take ourselves as something describable or typifiable. By contrast, the person, for Scheler, is not an object at all but the concrete unity of intentional acts, irreducible to the ego [Scheler 1973, 577-586]. Stein similarly treats the «I» of narrative identity as a constituted unity that emerges only at a certain level of psychic development and that presup-

poses the deeper lived unity of the psychophysical individual [Stein 2000, 103-127].

This narrative-reflective ego is precisely what collapses in psychedelic ego-dissolution. Autobiographical memory becomes inaccessible or irrelevant; the sense of being the protagonist of an ongoing life-story vanishes; social roles and future projects lose all salience. The loss is not experienced as a deficit but often as a liberation from a constricting fiction. Yet the fact that the experiencer can later report the absence of a narrative «I» already indicates that something more primitive than the ego remains.

4.3 For-me-ness: the Pre-Reflective Givenness of Experience

At the deepest and most resilient level lies the dimension classically described as the for-me-ness or ipseity of experience: what D. Zahavi terms pre-reflective self-awareness [Zahavi 2005]. This is not a represented «I», not even a minimal self-model; it is the very manner in which phenomena are given as appearing to someone. For-me-ness is the non-objectifying, non-thematic acquaintance with experience as mine before any reflective or narrative elaboration.

Scheler speaks of the person as an absolutely individual center of acts that can never become an object and whose individuality is expressed in the unique qualitative style of emotional life [Scheler 1973, 106–108]. Stein likewise describes a «pure I» that functions as the pole of every lived act yet never appears as an object within it [Stein 1989, 31-35]. Ingarden's stratified ontology complements this view by insisting that higher personal formations are founded upon but irreducible to psychic and organic strata; while the integration of these layers may be altered, the ontological structure of the real individual does not collapse into the empirical ego [Ingarden 2016, esp. Ch. VIII, §§ 39–45 and Ch. XIII, §§ 58–59].

For-me-ness is the thinnest yet necessary layer of selfhood. It is what survives even when the psychophysical totality is experienced as boundless and the narrative ego has vanished entirely. In the most extreme psychedelic states – the «whiteout» of high-dose 5-MeO-DMT or the «void» of certain breakthrough experiences – subjects report an absolute loss of content, yet the experience is still often lived as luminous, self-revealing awareness.

The three layers are hierarchically ordered but ontologically distinct. The narrative ego presupposes and is carried by for-me-ness; both presuppose psychophysical totality as their condition of manifestation. Psychedelics do not annihilate selfhood; they selectively suspend higher strata while allowing lower strata to become salient in unprecedented ways. The resulting experiences are therefore not evidence for the illusory nature of the self but privileged disclosures of its layered reality.

5. Varieties and Phenomenological Analysis of Psychedelic Ego-Dissolution

Psychedelic ego-dissolution is not a single phenomenon but a continuum whose qualitative structure varies with substance, dose, set, and setting. For analytical purposes we can distinguish four broad bands, each of which selectively affects the layers distinguished above.

a. Boundary softening (common at low-to-medium doses of psilocybin, LSD, mescaline)

This initial stage involves a mild relaxation of self-boundaries, where the psychophysical totality (embodied self) feels porous or interconnected with the environment, without disrupting the narrative ego. Vital-affective strata become subtly enhanced, fostering a sense of unity while preserving first-personal givenness. For instance, one report describes: «I felt myself mould into the world around me» [Erowid report, analysed in Millière 2017]. Another, from a 5D-ASC questionnaire item, states: «It seemed to me that my environment and I were one» [Studerus *et al.* 2010]. Huxley recounts: «I was no longer my Not-self in the Not-self which was the chair. I was the chair» [Huxley 1954, 22]. These reports demonstrate a selective disclosure of the psychophysical totality's affective openness, without narrative disruption.

b. Ego softening or decentering (medium-to-high therapeutic doses)

Here, the narrative-reflective ego begins to loosen, leading to a sense of detachment or observation of the self as «other». The psychophysical totality remains intact but feels decentred, with for-me-ness persisting

as a detached witness. This stage often involves emotional reframing, aligning with therapeutic insights. For example, one participant reports: «I observed myself as though I were a stranger» [Griffiths *et al.* 2011]. Another describes: «Feelings of disembodiment... I felt disconnected from my body» [Erowid report in Millière 2017]. A third notes: «I felt like I was dying, but it was peaceful» [Lebedev *et al.* 2015]. These align with a partial suspension of the narrative ego, heightening awareness of deeper vital strata as liberating rather than annihilating.

c. Narrative ego collapse with retained embodied/vital awareness (high-dose psilocybin, ayahuasca, LSD >400 µg)

The narrative-reflective ego fully collapses, erasing autobiographical continuity and social roles, but the psychophysical totality's vital-affective layer persists, often as ecstatic energy or aliveness. For-me-ness remains as a non-egoic horizon, enabling post-experience recall. One psilocybin report states: «There existed no one, not even me ... so would it be proper to still speak of “I”, even as the notion of “I” seemed so palpably illusory?» [Millière 2017]. Grof describes: «an ecstatic-state, characterized by the loss of boundaries between the subjective and the objective world, with ensuing feelings of unity with other people, nature, the entire Universe, and God» [Grof 1980, 45]. Another validated report affirms: «All notion of self and identity dissolved away» [Nour *et al.* 2016]. These illustrate the silencing of narrative strata, revealing the psychophysical totality's affective depth as the experiential ground.

d. Complete ego-dissolution / «whiteout» (intramuscular or vaporized high-dose 5-MeO-DMT, high-dose smoked N,N-DMT with MAOI, occasionally very high-dose psilocybin or ketamine).

All higher strata dissolve, including much of the psychophysical totality, leaving a contentless, boundless awareness. For-me-ness endures as pure givenness, often described as luminous or infinite, without any self-representation. One report recounts: «I felt as if “I” did no longer exist... I truly had to let go of myself, and that was profound» [Erowid report in Millière 2017]. Huxley notes a «final stage of ego-

lessness... feelings of unity with the universe» [Huxley 1954, 35]. Pol-
lan describes: «I could no longer locate [myself] in my head, because
it had exploded that too, expanding to become all that there was» [Pol-
lan 2018, 276-277]. These limit cases confirm the indestructibility of
for-me-ness, even as vital and narrative layers eclipse, vindicating the
stratified ontology.

As dosage and serotonergic perturbation increase, higher strata
are progressively suspended while lower strata become more salient.
In the limit case, even the vital-affective stratum of the psychophysi-
cal self is temporarily eclipsed, yet for-me-ness, the most primordial
layer, is not abolished; it is disclosed in its naked luminosity. Overall,
these graded reports from diverse sources underscore that psychede-
lics function as reversible ontological experiments: they demon-
strate that the narrative ego can be completely switched off without
loss of consciousness, that the vital-affective stratum of the psycho-
physical self can be radically altered or temporarily eclipsed, and that
for-me-ness remains the indestructible horizon of manifestation. The
pattern is the opposite of pathological depersonalisation/derealisation
(DP/DR). In DP/DR the disturbance characteristically begins at the
level of for-me-ness itself: experience feels strangely «not mine», as
if observed through a glass wall. Psychedelic dissolution, by contrast,
almost never affects the basic mineness of experience; what dissolves
are the higher, constructed layers that ordinarily obscure the deeper
ones. The difference is diagnostically and ontologically decisive. Far
from proving the self to be a mere predictive fiction, they reveal its
irreducibly layered structure.

6. Realist Phenomenology and the Disclosure of Deeper Strata

The tripartite framework developed above is not an abstract schema
imposed upon the data; it is the explicit articulation of distinctions al-
ready present in the realist-phenomenological tradition. Scheler, Stein,
and Ingarden, three thinkers who remained committed to the concrete
reality of the individual against both transcendental idealism and elim-
inativist reduction, offer concepts that map with striking precision onto
the phenomena of psychedelic ego-dissolution.

6.1 Max Scheler: from Egoic Feelings to the Stratum of Vital Feeling

Scheler repeatedly insists that the person is not identical with the psychological ego. In *Formalism in Ethics* he distinguishes four strata of emotional life:

1. sensible feelings (pain/pleasure localized in the body)
2. vital feelings (fatigue, vitality, health, illness, etc.)
3. psychic feelings (ego-bound emotions: pride, shame, resentment)
4. spiritual feelings (bliss, despair, love of being itself)

The empirical ego is especially bound up with the third stratum, where emotions are explicitly self-referential and tied to character and narrative identity. In experiences of ego-dissolution, this psychic-egoic organization may lose its ordinary coherence. What often becomes prominent instead are more fundamental layers of affective life: intensified vital feelings of aliveness and energy, and in some cases spiritual feelings of unity or unconditional affirmation that are no longer referred to a particular self-image. Such states do not entail the destruction of personhood in Scheler's sense. Rather, they involve a reconfiguration of affective depth in which ego-bound psychic emotions recede and other strata of feeling become phenomenally dominant.

6.2 Edith Stein: Porosity, Empathy, and the Suspension of the Foreign/Non-Foreign Distinction

Stein's phenomenology of empathy is built on the lived body as the indispensable mediator between self and other. In ordinary experience the other is given as foreign-yet-analogous: I experience the other's joy or pain as not-mine, yet as belonging to a lived body structurally analogous to my own. This distinction between «mine» and «foreign» is constitutive of intersubjective life.

Stein notes that the clarity and fullness of this distinction admit of degrees; the foreignness of the other can be more or less intensely experienced [Stein 1989, 58–60]. Although she does not dissolve the self–other distinction, her account allows for variations in how sharply alterity is lived. Certain altered states may therefore be interpreted as extreme modifications of this structure, in which the felt boundaries of

embodied selfhood loosen and the polarity of self and other becomes phenomenally attenuated.

In *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein further develops the human person as a finite spiritual being whose deepest ground participates in being itself. Experiences often described as «oceanic» or «unitive» in the psychedelic experience can, from within this broader framework, be read as intensified modes of lived participation that temporarily exceed the ordinary ego-bounded horizon—without thereby abolishing the structural distinction between persons.

6.3 Roman Ingarden: ontological stratification

Ingarden's ontology of the real individual offers one of the most precise phenomenological frameworks available for analyzing such states. In *The Controversy over the Existence of the World* vol. II, every real being exhibits a stratified structure comprising:

- a material stratum
- an organic (vital) stratum
- a psychic stratum (sensations, affects, representations)

In the case of human beings, higher-order personal acts, like responsible willing, value-response, love, and commitment, are founded upon but irreducible to these lower strata. Higher strata are existentially dependent on lower ones, yet they possess relative autonomy in their modes of functioning and determination.

Ingarden's account allows for the possibility that the integration between strata may be modified without the destruction of the whole individual. Disruptions at higher levels of personal and reflective organization need not annihilate the underlying organic or psychic layers; the asymmetry of dependence runs downward, not upward.

Psychedelic ego-dissolution can be interpreted within this framework not as the destruction of the person, but as a radical alteration in the integration of its strata:

- Reflective self-interpretation and narrative identity (higher-order personal formations) may lose coherence.
- The psychic stratum may undergo extreme transformation, with intensified affect and altered representational structure.

- Organic and bodily processes may become unusually salient within experience.

Such states would then represent not an ontological subtraction of layers, but a reconfiguration of foundedness relations within an enduring real individual.

Ingarden's framework therefore clarifies why such experiences can feel like ontological shifts: the structural dominance of higher-order personal organization is loosened, allowing other strata to become phenomenally prominent. What is attenuated is not personhood as such, but a historically sedimented mode of personal integration—particularly the reflective-narrative ego characteristic of late modernity.

7. Objections and replies

The argument developed here is likely to encounter three main lines of resistance. Each deserves a concise reply.

Objection 1 – «You are simply redescribing, in phenomenological jargon, the “minimal phenomenal self” that predictive-processing and self-model theories already concede. Letheby and Millière explicitly acknowledge that a thin for-me-ness persists in complete dissolution; your “deep layers” add no ontological surplus».

Reply: The difference is not terminological but categorical. In predictive-processing accounts, the persisting for-me-ness is still a represented model: the thinnest, most entrenched layer of hierarchical self-modelling. Phenomenologically, however, for-me-ness is not a model at all; it is the very givenness through which any model (thick or thin) could appear. A represented minimal self would itself require a non-represented acquaintance to be lived as mine. The residue in complete dissolution is therefore not the bottom rung of the same predictive ladder; it is the non-representational ground that the ladder presupposes. Scheler's «absolute personal core», Stein's «pure I», and Ingarden's limit-case of pure givenness all name this ground. Predictive processing has no resources to describe it except by misdescribing it as the last model.

Objection 2 – «Psychedelic states are pharmacologically induced brain perturbations. They are inherently pathological or at least epis-

temically unreliable; one cannot draw ontological conclusions from transient neurochemical happenings».

Reply: This objection conflates pathology with controlled disruption. Psychedelic states are reversible, dose-dependent, and disclose highly ordered, repeatable structures that are absent in organic psychosis or delirium. They function more like phenomenological «experiments» (in the sense of thought-experiments made experiential) than like diseases. Binocular rivalry, dreaming, sensory deprivation, and meditation all involve equally radical alterations of ordinary consciousness, yet no one dismisses the ontological insights gained from them on the grounds that they are «non-normal». The fact that a structure becomes visible only when higher strata are inhibited is not evidence against its reality; it is evidence that ordinary waking consciousness actively conceals it.

Objection 3 – «Despite disclaimers, your position is crypto-mysticism or a disguised substantialism. By insisting on an indestructible personal core you reintroduce a soul-like entity under phenomenological cover».

Reply: Realist phenomenology is neither mysticism nor traditional substantialism. Scheler, Stein, and Ingarden all reject the idea of a self-subsistent soul-substance. The «core» they describe is not a thing hidden behind acts but the lived unity of the acts themselves; it has no existence apart from its execution in embodiment and affectivity. For-me-ness is not an eternal monad but the finite, temporally extended manner in which a concrete human being is present to its own experience. Psychedelics do not reveal an immutable essence; they reveal that even the most radical reconfiguration of selfhood leaves a first-personal horizon that is inseparable from, yet not reducible to, neurobiological process. This is a robust realism about the person, not a return to pre-critical metaphysics.

These objections, far from undermining the layered account, actually strengthen it: they show how deeply entrenched the identification of selfhood with the narrative-reflective ego has become, and how difficult it is for both reductive naturalism and traditional substantialism to accommodate the phenomena disclosed when that ego temporarily vanishes.

8. *Conclusion*

Psychedelic ego-dissolution is neither the annihilation of the self nor its mystical transcendence. It is a controlled, reversible suspension of one historically dominant modality of selfhood that leaves deeper strata intact and, in many cases, luminously manifest. The persistence of a first-personal givenness even when name, history, body-boundaries, and time itself have vanished is not an incidental residue to be explained away; it is the phenomenological datum that demands a richer ontology than either predictive-processing naturalism or traditional substantialism can supply.

The tripartite framework offered here [psychophysical totality, narrative ego, for-me-ness] is not a speculative hypothesis. It is the systematic articulation of distinctions already present in the phenomenological realism of Scheler, Stein, and Ingarden, and it maps with striking precision onto the graded series of experiences reported under psychedelics. What these substances temporarily inhibit are the higher, constructed strata that ordinarily dominate waking consciousness in late-modern subjects. What they disclose are the vital-affective and pre-reflective layers that normally remain backgrounded yet are ontologically prior.

More broadly, the psychedelic renaissance invites a renewal of phenomenological method itself. Empirical science can map correlations and mechanisms with ever greater precision, but it cannot replace the disciplined description of lived structure. Only a phenomenology that remains open to extreme alterations of consciousness, and that refuses to let third-person models dictate what first-person evidence is allowed to mean, can do justice to the full depth of human individuality.

In the end, the question posed by the title – «How am I not myself?» – receives a clear answer. I am not myself in the precise sense that the narrative-reflective «myself» is only one, historically contingent layer of a far richer, dynamically stratified person. Psychedelics do not destroy the self; they temporarily liberate us from a too-narrow version of it, allowing the deeper question to sound forth with unusual clarity: not «Who am I?» but «How deeply and in how many ways can I still be, even when the ordinary “I” has fallen silent?»

That question belongs to phenomenology. The psychedelic experience, far from rendering it obsolete, has made it urgent again.

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Keywords

Psychedelics; Ego-Dissolution; Phenomenology of the Self; Realist Phenomenology; Stratified Ontology

Abstract

The psychedelic experience of ego-dissolution presents a striking paradox: the most radical apparent loss of self is nonetheless reported in vivid detail and frequently described as a disclosure of deeper unity. Contemporary neuroscience explains this phenomenon by the relaxation of high-level priors in the Default Mode Network, reducing the ordinary self to a useful fiction or minimal phenomenal self. This article sides with the first-person reports against such reductive accounts. It retrieves the realist phenomenology of the person developed by Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and Roman Ingarden within the Munich-Göttingen tradition. These thinkers offer a layered, non-essentialist ontology of individuality as a psychophysical, affectively structured, temporally extended unity. A tripartite distinction is introduced between the psychophysical totality, the narrative-reflective ego, and pre-reflective for-me-ness. Graded analysis

of psychedelic reports shows that only the narrative ego is suspended, while the vital-affective and first-personal layers become more salient. This pattern fits precisely the stratified ontologies of Scheler (affective strata), Stein (empathic porosity), and Ingarden (founded strata). Psychedelic ego-dissolution thus functions as a privileged limit case vindicating realist phenomenology over both transcendental idealism and neurocognitive eliminativism. The experience discloses, rather than dissolves, the layered reality of the self.

L'esperienza psichedelica della dissoluzione dell'ego presenta un paradosso sorprendente: la perdita apparente più radicale di sé viene comunque riportata con vividi dettagli e spesso descritta come una rivelazione di un'unità più profonda. Le neuroscienze contemporanee spiegano questo fenomeno con il rilassamento degli high-level priors nel Default Mode Network, che riduce il sé ordinario a una finzione utile o a un sé fenomenico minimo. Questo articolo si schiera con le testimonianze in prima persona contro tali resoconti riduttivi. Si recupera la fenomenologia realista della persona sviluppata da Max Scheler, Edith Stein e Roman Ingarden all'interno della tradizione di Monaco-Göttinga. Questi pensatori offrono un'ontologia stratificata e non essenzialista dell'individualità come unità psicofisica, strutturata affettivamente ed estesa temporalmente. Viene introdotta una distinzione tripartita tra la totalità psicofisica, l'ego narrativo-riflessivo e il per-me preriflessivo. Da un'analisi graduale delle testimonianze psichedeliche emerge che solo l'ego narrativo viene sospeso, mentre gli strati vitale-affettivo e in prima persona diventano più salienti. Questo modello si adatta perfettamente alle ontologie stratificate di Scheler (strati affettivi), Stein (porosità empatica) e Ingarden (strati fondati). La dissoluzione psichedelica dell'ego funziona quindi come un caso limite privilegiato che legittima la fenomenologia realista sia rispetto all'idealismo trascendentale sia rispetto all'eliminativismo neurocognitivo. L'esperienza rivela, piuttosto che dissolvere, la realtà stratificata del sé.

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