

NOTES FROM: *This is Your Mind on Plants*, by Michael Pollan

SUMMARY: Is the plant that produces caffeine using *us*, or are we using *it*? Can consciousness be expanded in a way that's "safe" and doesn't lead to addiction, or is mescaline the scourge that fearmongers have always claimed it is? Do the opiates that have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people by overdose have benefits that outweigh their devastating costs?

Michael Pollan fearlessly (and sometimes fearfully) addresses these and other pressing questions of our times in his follow-up to the absolutely phenomenal book, *How to Change Your Mind*.

There's a ton of nuance here, both in this book and the wider issues it addresses, as Pollan investigates the fascinating and, I'll say it, surprising reach of psychoactive compounds like caffeine, opium, and mescaline, among others. These compounds are *not* unmitigated goods. They come with dangers, pitfalls, dead ends, and as long as people have been around there have been people who have fallen into them.

That being said, these psychoactive compounds (and whoever thought of caffeine as such?) are here to stay, and how we integrate them into our societies and into our lives will make all the difference for our future, our continued progress, and our reconciliation with everyone with whom we share this earth.

I have a personal history – though by no means as extensive as Pollan's – with compounds such as ayahuasca and mescaline (and obviously coffee!), and so I've seen, witnessed, first-hand how powerful they are and how much they have to give us and to show us. But I don't see why they should be the preserve of a limited set of the population. Consciousness has no "identity," no "race" or "subject," and these plants belong to the earth and everyone who lives here. Whether we realize that and take the necessary steps could decide everything.

"The same opiates that killed some fifty thousand Americans by overdose in 2019 also make surgery endurable and ease the passage out of this life. Surely that qualifies as a blessing."

"'You want to know what this was really all about?' Ehrlichman began, startling the journalist with both his candor and his cynicism. Ehrlichman explained that the Nixon White House 'had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people... We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.'"

“The campaign produced an explosion in prescriptions for OxyContin that would earn the company’s owners, the Sackler family, more than \$35 billion, while leading to more than 230,000 deaths by overdose.”

“The Sacklers joined a tradition of illustrious American families whose fortunes flowed from the sale of opium and its derivatives, including John Jacob Astor and the Cabots, Perkinses, and Cushings of Boston, all much better known for their philanthropy and patronage.”

“Hogshire didn’t go quite that far, but he did write that ‘it is unclear whether it is illegal to brew tea from poppies you’ve purchased legally from the store.’ As will soon become evident, Jim Hogshire is no longer unclear on either of these points.”

“Like the opiate it is, or consists of, poppy tea is a pain killer in every sense. In my notes I wrote ‘definitely lightens the existential load.’”

“I did feel a powerful urge to close my eyes – not from any drowsiness, but from a radical and by no means unpleasant sense of passivity. I just didn’t need to have all that visual information, thank you very much. My senses were functioning normally, yet I didn’t particularly feel like acting on their data. At one point I remember feeling chilled, but couldn’t be bothered to close a window or put on a sweater. I’ll just sit here awhile longer if that’s okay. ‘Like sitting out on the front porch of one’s consciousness, watching the world go by,’ I wrote, somewhat cryptically.”

“It’s worth noting that during the period of anti-alcohol hysteria that led to Prohibition, certain forms of opium were as legal and almost as widely available in this country as alcohol is today.”

“The war on drugs is in truth a war on *some* drugs, their enemy status the result of historical accident, cultural prejudice, and institutional imperative. The taxonomy on behalf of which this war is being fought would be difficult to explain to an extraterrestrial, or even a farmer like Matyas. Is it the quality of addictiveness that renders a substance illicit? Not in the case of tobacco, which I am free to grow in this garden. Curiously, the current campaign against tobacco dwells less on cigarettes’ addictiveness than on their threat to our health. So is it toxicity that renders a substance a public menace? Well, my garden is full of plants – datura and euphorbia, castor beans, and even the leaves of my rhubarb – that would sicken and possibly kill me if I ingested them, but the government trusts me to be careful. Is it, then, the prospect of pleasure – of ‘recreational use’ – that puts a substance beyond the pale? Not in the case of alcohol: I can legally produce wine or hard cider or beer from my garden for my personal use (though there are regulations governing its distribution to others). So could it be a drug’s ‘mind-altering’ properties that make it evil? Certainly not in the case of Prozac, a drug that, much like opium, mimics chemical compounds manufactured in the brain.”

“While we were caught up in this remote and ridiculous skirmish in the drug war, the drug in question was quietly and legally making its way into the bodies of millions of Americans, as Purdue Pharma pursued its marketing campaign, seeding the culture with seductive disinformation about the safety of OxyContin. There’s a parable here somewhere, about the difference between journalism and history. What might appear to be ‘the story’ in the present moment may actually be a distraction from it, a shiny object preventing us from seeing the truth

of what is really going on beneath the surface of our attention, what will most deeply affect people's lives in time.

This also turns out to be a pretty good summary of the drug war, which, besides doing so much to erode our liberties and fill our prisons, served to distract us from reckoning the true toll of the opiates we happened to classify as legal. I doubt anyone has ever died of an overdose of illicit poppy tea.”

“As for the Sacklers and their criminal enterprise, at least some small portion of justice has been done. In 2020, the family agreed to a settlement with the Department of Justice, under which they pled guilty to criminal charges and agreed to pay \$8.3 billion in penalties. Early in 2021, the Sacklers proposed an additional \$4.275 billion to reimburse states, municipalities, and tribes for costs incurred by the epidemic and to compensate the families of their victims – the hundreds of thousands of people who have died by opioid overdose since the introduction of OxyContin in 1996. It is unfortunate that, thanks to the protections afforded by the bankruptcy laws and the ingenuity of lawyers and accountants, it could be years before any of these families sees a dime.”

“Indeed, for most of us, to be caffeinated to one degree or another has simply become baseline human consciousness. Something like 90 percent of humans ingest caffeine regularly, making it the most widely used psychoactive drug in the world, and the only one we routinely give to children (commonly in the form of soda). Few of us even think of it as a drug, much less our daily use of it as an addiction. It's so pervasive that it's easy to overlook the fact that to be caffeinated is not baseline consciousness but, in fact, an altered state. It just happens to be a state that virtually all of us share, rendering it invisible.”

“This is part of the insidiousness of caffeine. Its mode of action, or ‘pharmacodynamics,’ mesh so perfectly with the rhythms of the human body, so that the morning cup of coffee arrives just in time to head off the looming mental distress set in motion by yesterday's cup of coffee. Daily, caffeine proposes itself as the optimal solution to the problem caffeine creates. How brilliant!”

“A Venetian traveler to Constantinople in 1585 noted that the locals ‘are in the habit of drinking in public in shops and in the streets, a black liquid, boiling as they can stand it, which is extracted from a seed they call Cave...and is said to have the property of keeping a man awake.’”

“If alcohol fuels our Dionysian tendencies, caffeine nurtures the Apollonian.”

“It is one thing to live in a shared culture of caffeine, in which everyone's mind is running at more or less the same accelerated pace. But it's quite another to find yourself so sped up mentally that other people appear to you like motionless figures on a train platform, as you blur by them in caffeinated clouds of impatience.”

“What mental breakthrough has ever been credited to mint tea?”

“Perched somewhat crookedly on the steep slope of one of these caffeine mountains, my main thought was, *You really have to give this plant a lot of credit*. In less than a thousand years it has

managed to get itself from its evolutionary birthplace in Ethiopia all the way here to the mountains of South America and beyond, using our species as its vector.

Consider all we've done on this plant's behalf: allotted it more than 27 million hectares of new habitat, assigned 25 million humans to carefully tend it, and bid up its price until it became one of the most precious crops on earth. This astounding success is owing to one of the cleverest evolutionary strategies ever chanced upon by a plant: the trick of producing a psychoactive compound that happens to fire the minds of one especially clever primate, inspiring that animal to heroic feats of industriousness, many of which ultimately redound to the benefit of the plant itself. For coffee and tea have not only benefited by gratifying human desire, as have so many other plants, but these two have also assisted in the construction of precisely the kind of civilization in which they could best thrive: a world ringed by global trade, driven by consumer capitalism, and dominated by a species that by now can barely get out of bed without their help."

"But that's how evolution works: nature's most propitious accidents become evolutionary strategies for world domination. Who could have guessed that a secondary metabolite produced by plants to poison insects would also deliver an energizing bolt of pleasure to a human brain, and then turn out to alter that brain's neurochemistry in a way that made those plants indispensable?"

"The question arises: which is getting the better of the symbiotic arrangement between *Homo sapiens* and these two great caffeine-producing plants? We probably lack the perspective needed to judge the question impartially, or to perceive how a plant we 'use' might actually be using us. Big-brained and self-regarding primates that we are, we automatically assume we've been calling the shots with these two 'domesticated' species, transporting and planting them where we choose, earning billions off them, and deploying them to gratify our needs and desires. *We're in charge*, we tell ourselves. But isn't that exactly what you'd expect an addict to say? *Sure you are*. Bear in mind that caffeine has been known to produce delusions of power in the humans who consume it, and that this story of world-conquering success would read very differently had the plants themselves been able to write it."

"Reading Huxley's account while quarantined in a pandemic intensified my desire to try mescaline. The idea that a molecule could somehow deepen or expand the scope of one's reality suggested a mental strategy nicely tailored to the situation. I was reminded of the lovely line Shakespeare gave Hamlet, enduring a different kind of claustrophobia: 'I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space.' Mescaline might offer a way to do that, not as a means of escape from circumstance, but as an expansion of it. Instead of an alternate reality, it promised infinitely more of this one."