

Psyche-delic = Soul revealing

A psycholinguistic etymological analysis

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Abstract

The composite lexeme "psyche-delic" is widely used in colloquial discourse and has acquired many different context-dependent meanings. From a cognitive semiotics perspective, the root meaning of the term is essential. In his paper, we derive the etymology of the term psychedelic and put an emphasis on its revelatory character. We then relate this interpretation to other schools of thought, such as Advaita Vedanta.

Etymological root of the term "psychedelic"

The term "psychedelic" is a composite lexeme composed of the ancient Greek ψυχή (*psukhḗ*, "mind, soul, spirit") + δῆλος (*dêlos*, "to make visible, to show, to manifest, to reveal"), i.e., "psychedelic" could be adequately translated as "mind manifesting" or "soul revealing".

Etymological derivation of the composite lexeme:

psukhḗ (ψυχή) = mind, soul, spirit

dêlos (δῆλος) = to manifest, to reveal

Greek mythology

According to Greek mythology, the son of Zeus named Apollo was born on the island of *Delos*. Leto searched for a place to give birth to her children, but all the islands refused her. There was only a floating rock in the middle of the sea which she chose. However, this rock turned out to be an island. Being the god of the sun and the light, the day Apollo was born the rock revealed itself as an island as it was flooded by light. Ergo, it was named *Delos*, a verb that in Greek can be translated with δηλώω (*deloo*), meaning "to reveal, to show", because the island was revealed to human beings. This is why the island came to be called Delos, which means 'visible', before which it was a floating rock *or Adelos* (the invisible). In the same way psychedelics can show us our true nature – *vidya* vs. *avidya*. The metaphor illustrates that we fallaciously identify with our small ego – but in actuality we are much more than a floating rock. *Tat tvam asi*.

Prof. Erwin Schrödinger

The same unified (Advaita) viewpoint has been formulated by the renowned Austrian quantum physicist and Nobel laureate and founder of quantum physics Erwin Schrödinger, who was deeply impressed by Vedānta philosophy. He wrote in his seminal book "What is Life":

"The only possible alternative is simply to keep the immediate that consciousness is a singular of which the plural is unknown; that there is only one thing and that, which seems to be a plurality, is merely a series of different aspects of this one thing, produced by a deception (the Indian Maya); the same illusion is produced in a gallery of mirrors, and in the same way Gaurisankar and Mt. Everest turned out to be the same peak seen from different valleys..." (Schrödinger, 1944, p. 89).

Prof. Max Planck

Schrödinger is not the only influential quantum physicist who postulates the primacy and continuity of consciousness. For instance, his eminent German colleague and fellow Nobel laureate Max Planck (who coined the term "quantum") states in his speech on "Das Wesen der Materie" [The Nature of Matter]:

„Als Physiker, der sein ganzes Leben der nüchternen Wissenschaft, der Erforschung der Materie widmete, bin ich sicher von dem Verdacht frei, für einen Schwarmgeist gehalten zu werden. Und so sage ich nach meinen Erforschungen des Atoms dieses: Es gibt keine Materie an sich. Alle Materie entsteht und besteht nur durch eine Kraft, welche die Atomteilchen in Schwingung bringt und sie zum winzigsten Sonnensystem des Alls zusammenhält. Da es im ganzen Weltall aber weder eine intelligente Kraft noch eine ewige Kraft

gibt—es ist der Menschheit nicht gelungen, das heißersehnte Perpetuum mobile zu erfinden—so müssen wir hinter dieser Kraft einen bewußten intelligenten Geist annehmen. Dieser Geist ist der Urgrund aller Materie." (Planck, 1944).

Translation:

"As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear headed science, to the study of matter, I can tell you as a result of my research about atoms this much: There is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force which brings the particle of an atom to vibration and holds this most minute solar system of the atom together. We must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent Mind. This Mind is the matrix of all matter." (as cited in Pickover, 2008)

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

The English translation is not perfect and "Mind" should be translated as "Spirit" (Geist) – an important distinction. The same non-dual perspective as articulated by Schrödinger and Planck can be found back in several ancient Indian wisdom traditions. For example, the great scientist of the mind Patañjali writes in Sanskrit:

हृद्दर्शनशक्त्योरेकात्मतैवास्मिता

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"To identify consciousness with that which merely reflects consciousness – this is egoism." (Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, Chapter 2, Aphorism 6; Swami Prabhavananda trans., 1991; p.74).

Prof. Henry Stapp

According to quantum physicists Henry Stapp (who worked with Heisenberg and Wheeler) the wave function is made out of "mind stuff". Stapp became well known in the physics community for his work on S-matrix theory, nonlocality, and the place of free will in orthodox von Neumann quantum mechanics. Stapp argues that most contemporary physicists would explain that the wave-function is a vector in a linear Hilbert space. Stapp argues that this explanation points to the fact that the wave-function is not a material thing but a mental concept. It belongs to the realm of mind and not to the domain of matter. In classical Cartesian dualistic terminology: it belongs to the *res cogitans* and not to the *res extensa*.

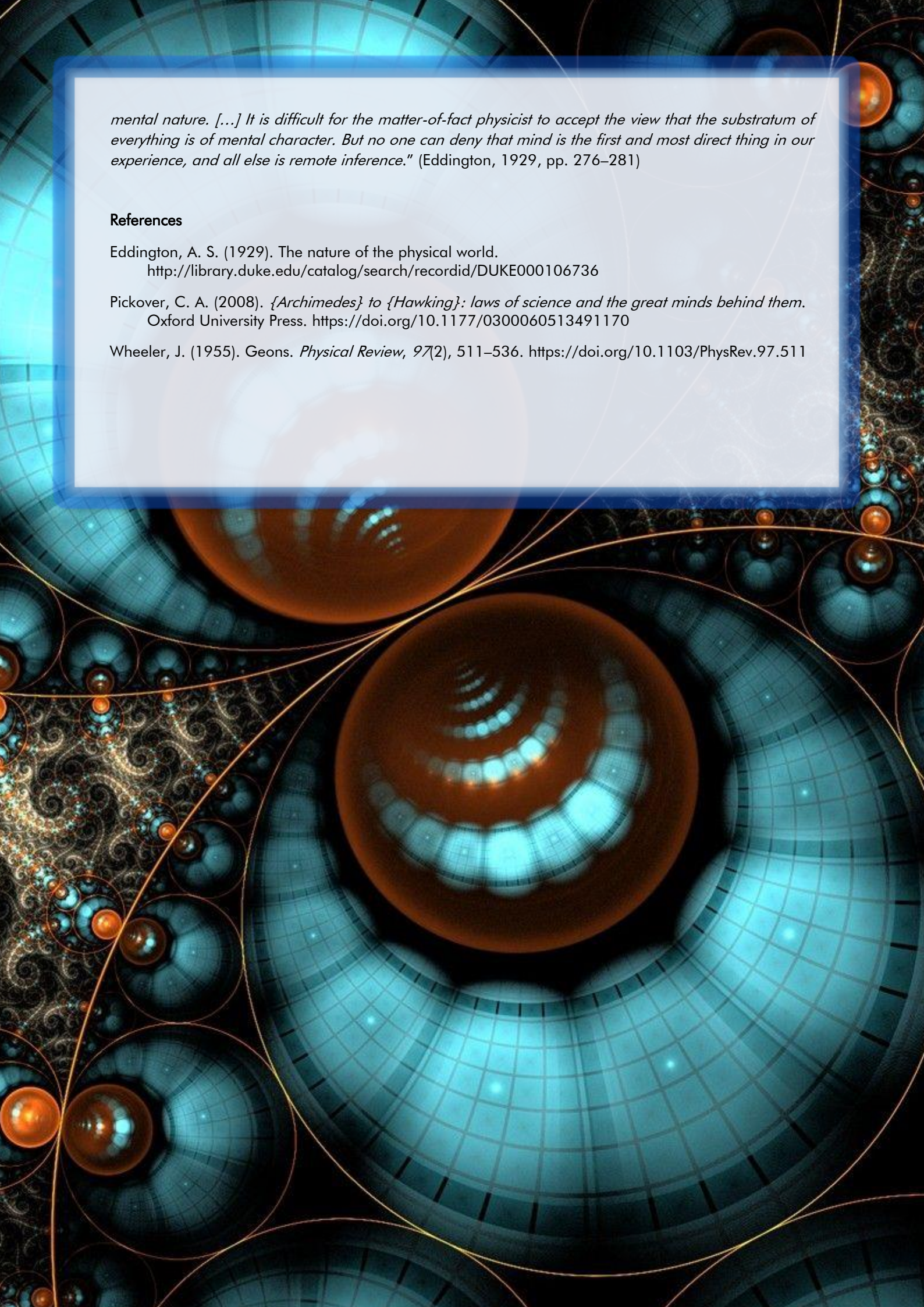
According to the Cartesian framework it appears as if two players would be involved: the observer (the one who is asking the question) and the observed (i.e., matter/nature). However, according to Henry Stapp quantum theory combines this dichotomy between epistemology and ontology because it was realized that the only things that really existed were knowledge. That is, ontology is always defined by epistemology which is primary. In simple terms, knowledge (a faculty of the human mind) is primary and hitherto "objective" matter secondary. In a sense, quantum physics addressed a quintessential and long-standing philosophical problem, namely how epistemology and ontology interact and relate to each other. Thereby, quantum physics overcomes this dualistic notion inherited from western philosophy and merged the concepts into one integrated whole.¹

Sir Arthur Eddington

A similar monistic perspective on the primacy of consciousness was advocated by Sir Arthur Eddington who argued that dualistic metaphysics (which form the unquestioned implicit basis of the large majority of contemporary scientific theories) are not supported by empirical evidence:

"The mind-stuff of the world is, of course, something more general than our individual conscious minds. [...] The mind-stuff is not spread in space and time; these are part of the cyclic scheme ultimately derived out of it. [...] It is necessary to keep reminding ourselves that all knowledge of our environment from which the world of physics is constructed, has entered in the form of messages transmitted along the nerves to the seat of consciousness. [...] Consciousness is not sharply defined, but fades into subconsciousness; and beyond that we must postulate something indefinite but yet continuous with our

¹ Note that we are not trying to argue that the ancient advaitic tradition is scientifically supported by quantum physics. However, there are undeniable and interesting parallels between these widely separated fields of inquiry which both inquire into the ultimate nature of reality. The Upanishads (which form the scriptural basis of Advaita Vedānta) are to a large extent formulated in terms of poetry and metaphors (e.g., Brahman is often compared to the ocean). However, quantum physics also utilizes metaphorical terms with oftentimes technical meaning, e.g., "quantum foam" (aka. spacetime foam) – a concept devised by theoretical physicist John Wheeler (Wheeler, 1955).



mental nature. [...] It is difficult for the matter-of-fact physicist to accept the view that the substratum of everything is of mental character. But no one can deny that mind is the first and most direct thing in our experience, and all else is remote inference." (Eddington, 1929, pp. 276–281)

References

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