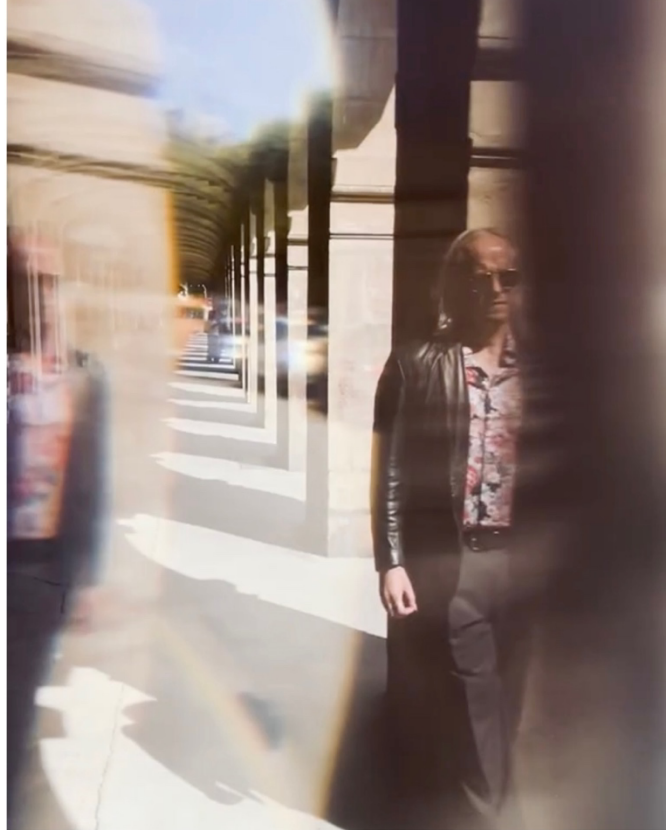


Psychedelics Blew His Mind. He Wants Other Philosophers to Open Theirs.

An intense exchange with Marilyn Monroe sounds silly. But in a new book, Justin Smith-Ruiu is dead serious about what we might learn from altered states.



By [Emily Eakin](#)

Emily Eakin is a senior editor at the Book Review. Her book “The Frenchmen,” about the postwar French philosophers who took over American culture, will be published next year.

Sept. 21, 2025

Nearly everyone struggled during the pandemic, but Justin Smith-Ruiu’s struggle took a particularly disturbing form. An American philosopher who teaches at the University of Paris, he was on a fellowship in New York in March 2020 when the city shut down, stranding him in a rental apartment in Brooklyn. He caught Covid the same month, and though he recovered from the virus, he sank into a deep, existential despair.

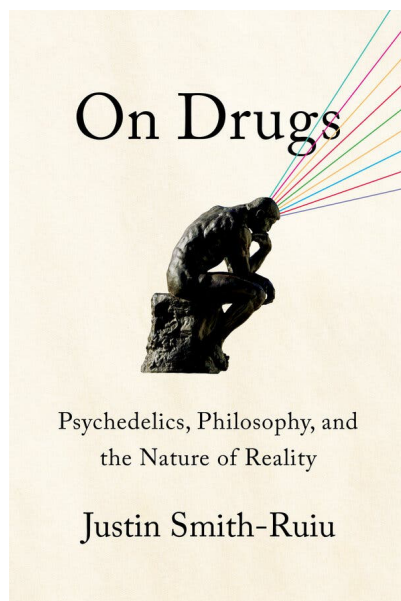
His job, his career milestones, even the homes, schools, hospitals and other institutions around which human social life revolved: All of it suddenly seemed flimsy and meaningless, like so much make-believe. “I had the sharp sense that the things that we take to be real just aren’t real,” he told me. “It was quite extreme.”

Smith-Ruiu, 53, could have sought counseling or joined the [Great Resignation](#) by quitting his job. Instead, he turned to drugs — first cannabis, then psilocybin (“magic

mushrooms”) and, finally, muscimol, a psychedelic made from another mushroom, the fly agaric.

Yet his interest in mind-altering substances was as much professional as personal: His crisis of belief in the world around him was also, he concluded, a problem for his field. Philosophy is concerned with some of the most fundamental questions — about the nature of reality, time, the self and other minds. So why did the discipline automatically exclude from consideration experiences that challenge, in spectacular if temporary ways, our basic understanding of these concepts?

This conundrum led first to a [story in Wired magazine](#), and then to a book: “On Drugs: Psychedelics, Philosophy, and the Nature of Reality,” which will be published on Tuesday. Why assume that our minds, in their sober “default state,” are naturally designed to grasp reality *as it really is*? Smith-Ruiu asks. Why not “explore all the modes of consciousness available to us”? What might they tell us about “the relationship between mind and world?”



Propelled by lofty ideas, Smith-Ruiu’s book lands with a dignified rustle amid a growing din. Enthusiasm for drug-induced mind expansion has lately reached a fever pitch, the ranks of seekers swelling to encompass not only [Oregon clinics for the terminally ill](#) but also [Elon Musk](#) and [much](#) of [Silicon Valley](#), as well as Wall Street boardrooms, [church pulpits](#) and [Capitol Hill](#) — an [unlikely new vanguard](#) of psychonauts pursuing an unholy mix of spiritual gain and maximum profit, not necessarily in that order.

Investment in plant-based psychoactives [is up](#), spurred in part by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s suggestion that some [psychedelics should be legal](#). (His son

took ayahuasca in Patagonia and returned home a [changed man](#), doing the dishes and taking out the trash; who wouldn't be in favor of such a drug?)

Recent converts include the former Trump administration energy secretary Rick Perry, a [vocal promoter](#) of ibogaine, a psychedelic derived from the bark of an African shrub that, he [told Joe Rogan](#), has shown “stunning ability to bring people back to normalcy, to reset their brains, to literally give them their lives back.”

Smith-Ruiu, by contrast, shuns the language of transcendence and cure. “On Drugs” is a searching, philosophical meditation, not a brief for recreational or therapeutic drug use. Its aim is to destabilize certainties, not provide answers. “I think it would be detrimental to society if everyone was going around completely ripped all the time,” he told me over lunch during a visit to New York this spring. “I would never want to set myself up as an advocate.”

Nibbling pan-seared salmon in a dark T-shirt and jacket at a West Village restaurant, he looked every bit the strait-laced professor. Only his hair — shoulder-length, blond — conveyed a hint of nonconformism, or maybe just of California, where he grew up.



“What are we supposed to do with those human experiences that we all know exist but that defy language?” Smith-Ruiu asks. Credit...Elliott Verdier for The New York Times

A specialist in the history and philosophy of science whose next book is a scholarly study of Leibniz, he stressed that he wrote “On Drugs” stone sober and broke no laws to obtain the substances he ingested for his research.

In the case of psilocybin, this meant visits to a “smart shop” in the Netherlands, where, through a loophole of local law, the lumpy brown, subterranean mushroom “truffle” (but no other part) is available for purchase — and then only after a mandatory consultation with an employee. Smith-Ruiu’s salesman chastised him for referring to the mushrooms as drugs, rather than plants. (In fact, they belong to a separate kingdom: fungi.)

His ensuing trips on the truffles are recounted in “On Drugs” with the grave attention of a scientist in the lab. “They tasted much sourer than I had expected, and it was long, hard work to get them down,” he observes at the outset. From there, things get strange. On a dose “far more than is recommended,” he experienced an intense “*interpersonal exchange*” with Marilyn Monroe, who loomed from a poster on his hotel room wall, and, via YouTube clips, an even more powerful bond with [Mama Cass](#), the late lead singer of the 1960s band the Mamas & the Papas: “Mama Cass suddenly appeared to me as ‘Mama’ in the fullest sense: the fount of my being and the origin of my world.”

On yet another trip, he understood that he was no longer any kind of being at all.

Ridiculous? Sure. But ridiculous, Smith-Ruiu insists, is the point. When philosophers think about consciousness, they tend to focus on “paradigm cases,” he said — a cat on a mat or a red dot on a screen. “These are important problems,” he went on. “How are we able to apprehend such basic facts about the world around us? But I think it might be methodologically preferable to go to the weirdest things our minds do and see what the problem of consciousness looks like then.”

Western philosophy was once more open to weirdness. In 1748, the Scottish philosopher David Hume showed how the contents of our minds are mere mental images, not direct perceptions of things in the world. As proof he offered the example of [the shrinking table](#). A table appears to get smaller as we back away from it, though of course its size doesn’t actually change. The notion that mental images do not coincide with external reality gave rise, in the early 20th century, to an influential philosophical school: phenomenology.

Philosophers also sought insights through drugs. In the 1920s, Walter Benjamin [took opium and hashish](#), keeping rigorous notes on his altered state. In 1935, Jean-Paul Sartre took mescaline — research for a scholarly book on the imagination. (He had a [bad trip](#) and for weeks afterward was convinced he was being followed by crabs.) In 1975, Michel Foucault dropped acid in Death Valley, an experience he called “one of the most important in my life,” claiming it caused him to completely rethink his final work, on the history of sexuality.



Smith-Ruiu teaches at the University of Paris. Credit...Elliott Verdier for The New York Times

Of all the thinkers who dabbled in mind-bending substances, perhaps the Harvard psychologist William James most closely anticipated Smith-Ruiu's views. Evoking the wonder he felt tripping on nitrous oxide (laughing gas) as well as the "veriest nonsense" of his attempts to render the event in words, James was adamant that, as he wrote in "The Varieties of Religious Experience" in 1902, "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different."

For most of philosophy's history, such a claim would hardly have seemed radical. "The findings of psychedelics wouldn't have surprised Heraclitus, Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Nietzsche and, most certainly, William James," John Kaag, a philosopher at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell and an expert on James, told me. Only over the past 100 years has the discipline, through an "analytic turn," been "trying to reduce all of human experience to the understandable, to the explicable," he said. "And James says, no, reality always outstrips the descriptions of it — and that's for the best."

With "On Drugs," Smith-Ruiu seeks to drive this idea home. One chapter imagines how Descartes' famous proof of existence would read had the French philosopher first taken a hit of acid. His point: The rational consciousness favored by Descartes and his philosopher descendants — our "default neurochemical setting" — may be simply one mode among many for encountering the world.

“What are we supposed to do with those human experiences that we all know exist but that defy language?” Smith-Ruiiu said at lunch. “It seems strange to consider no other neurochemical settings as giving any kind of access to the way the world is.”

Smith-Ruiiu hasn’t tripped since completing his book, but it’s fair to say that his own default neurochemical setting has shifted. His crisis of meaning during the pandemic led to a number of drastic changes. He stopped drinking. He started a [Substack](#), featuring essays and even fiction written in a new way, more creative, less academic. He also changed his name, adding, after 18 years of marriage, his wife’s last name — Ruiiu (pronounced roo-you) — to his. He’s largely unconcerned about how “On Drugs” might be received by his colleagues. In short, he is hardly the same person he was before.

“Sometimes I imagine that I did not survive the pandemic and that my life halves somehow split,” he said, marveling at the thought. “I’m still navigating this transition from someone who had been a very straight and narrow and rigorous scholar to someone who is much freer.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/21/books/review/justin-smith-ruiiu-on-drugs-philosophy.html>

Not sure what to make of this. There is “reality” to this recognition of other realities. I have had my own strange experiences, and continue to have them. I still fail to truly grasp the nature of who and what I am as a “consciousness.” (I’m not sure this is possible given the framework we are in whether sane and sober or tripping. “Self” is inadequate, if not a fiction: If we are one self, it is for the moment; we are many selves or “ego states.” Robert J. Lifton’s “Protean Self” is onto something.

I have C.G. Jung’s “The Red Book.” I purchased it in an effort to try to get some better understanding of imagination and the creative process. “The Antipodes of the Mind” by the Israeli Benny Shanon also helped. (He didn’t help his cause when he suggested Moses might have been high on something when he saw the burning bush.) Ayahuasca has become a phenomenon in itself. Mr. Smith Ruiiu’s son, like many others, might have benefited from taking it, but not everyone does. It facilitates entry into a realm, or realms, where all the forces and powers are not friendly. Some are demonic—and the demonic takes many guises. Not all such actors with agendas look nasty and venomous; some are quite charming though this is no guarantee of goodness or good intentions; it is still all about them. I think many are just “stuck” for various reasons acting their stuff out on vulnerable souls.

Which has led me to conclude there is a necessary place for good-old everyday consciousness. It discerns and learns many good things, keeping bad actors at bay. When it sleeps, trouble often happens as the mice run havoc in undefended turf. Religious believers aren’t always wrong when they insist that unconscious eruptions contrary to their conscious intentions come from the demonic rather than as indicators of conscious error. Consciousness mostly and rightly fits us to this world. To apprehend it, we must sacrifice our capacity for the full experience of the numinous, the Ineffable. *Ein Sof* is way beyond our capacity to comprehend. TJB