



Bicycle Day's Dilemma

From the writings of Albert Hoffmann

Excerpts

In the foreword to his 1980 book, *LSD - My Problem Child* (McGraw-Hill, 1980), Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann wrote:

It is my desire in this book to give a comprehensive picture of LSD, its origin, its effects, and its dangers, in order to guard against increasing abuse of this extraordinary drug. I hope thereby to emphasize possible uses of LSD that are compatible with its characteristic action. I believe that if people would learn to use LSD's vision-inducing capability more wisely, under suitable conditions, in medical practice and in conjunction with meditation, then in the future this problem child could become a wonder child.

The book includes Hofmann's 1943 laboratory notes when he was a Sandoz employee who unwittingly ingested lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), a semi-synthetic substance he had created for obstetrics purposes, five years earlier.

Last Friday, April 16, 1943, I was forced to interrupt my work in the laboratory in the middle of the afternoon and proceed home, being affected by a remarkable restlessness, combined with a slight dizziness. At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant intoxicated-like condition, characterized by an extremely stimulated imagination. In a dreamlike state, with eyes closed (I found the daylight to be unpleasantly glaring), I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors. After some two hours, this condition faded away.

A few days later, to confirm his hunch that LSD had a special mind-altering quality, Hofmann experimented. He took a tiny amount at 4:20 pm, and at 5:00 pm jotted in his notes: "Beginning dizziness, feeling of anxiety, visual distortions, symptoms of paralysis, desire to laugh." But as the full effects of LSD unfolded, Hofmann was no longer able to write. In his book, he explained what happened next:

I had to struggle to speak intelligibly. I asked my laboratory assistant, who was informed of the self-experiment, to escort me home. We went by bicycle, no automobile being available because of wartime restrictions on their use. On the way home, my condition began to assume threatening forms. Everything in my field of vision wavered and was distorted as if seen in a curved mirror. I also had the sensation of being unable to move from the spot. Nevertheless, my assistant later told me that we had traveled very rapidly.

April 19, 1943 would become known as Bicycle Day, the world's first "acid trip." But for Hofmann, the experience wasn't all fun and games.

I was seized by the dreadful fear of going insane. I was taken to another world, another place, another time. My body seemed to be without sensation, lifeless, strange. Was I dying? Was this the transition? At times I believed myself to be outside my body, and then perceived clearly, as an outside observer, the complete tragedy of my situation. I had not even taken leave of my family (my wife, with our three children, had traveled that day to visit her parents in Lucerne). Would they ever understand that I had not experimented thoughtlessly, irresponsibly, but rather with the utmost caution, and that such a result was in no way foreseeable? My fear and despair intensified, not only because a young family should lose its father, but also because I dreaded leaving my chemical research work, which meant so much to me, unfinished in the midst of fruitful, promising development. Another reflection took shape, an idea full of bitter irony: If I was now forced to leave this world prematurely, it was because of this Lysergic acid diethylamide that I myself had brought forth into the world.

Despite its disturbing effects, Hofmann would go on to champion the careful use of LSD for a range of psychiatric, spiritual and medical purposes until his death in 2008, noting its success as a treatment for alcohol dependence and other difficulties requiring a mind-changing experience to move forward. But he never understood or embraced it as a recreational drug, neither before nor after it was listed as an illegal substance in the 1970s.

This joy at having fathered LSD was tarnished after more than ten years of uninterrupted scientific research and medicinal use when LSD was swept up in the huge wave of an inebriant mania that began to spread over the western world, above all the United States, at the end of the 1950s. It was strange how rapidly LSD adopted its new role as inebriant and, for a time, became the number-one inebriating drug, at least as far as publicity was concerned. The more its use as an inebriant was disseminated, bringing an upsurge in the number of untoward incidents caused by careless, medically unsupervised use, the more LSD became a problem child for me and for the Sandoz firm.

