

# Awakenings

## The Stoned Ape Hypothesis Reconsidered



SALIENCE

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Terence McKenna's "Stoned Ape" hypothesis was presented in his book, *Food of the Gods* in 1993. [1](#)

Does anyone take McKenna's "stoned ape theory" seriously?

Perplexity AI replies: [2](#)

## Scientific Reception of McKenna's Stoned Ape Theory

### Summary of the Theory

Terence McKenna's "Stoned Ape Theory" proposes that the consumption of psychedelic mushrooms (specifically psilocybin) by early hominins was a key factor in the rapid expansion of the human brain and the emergence of language, culture, and higher consciousness.

### Mainstream Scientific View

The Stoned Ape Theory is not taken seriously by the mainstream scientific community. It is widely regarded as speculative and lacking in empirical support:

- The theory has not been substantiated by archaeological or genetic evidence and is not referenced in formal academic discussions on human evolution .
- Critics note that McKenna's hypothesis relies heavily on anecdotal claims and misinterpretations of scientific studies, particularly regarding psilocybin's effects on visual acuity and sexual arousal .

- The idea that psychedelic-induced changes could be inherited genetically is considered a fundamental flaw, as such acquired traits are not passed down through DNA .
- Alternative explanations for the rapid expansion of the human brain—such as the development of cooking, complex social structures, and tool use—are far better supported by evidence .

## Status Among Scientists and Academics

- The theory is almost entirely ignored by paleoanthropologists, neuroscientists, and evolutionary biologists .
- When discussed, it is usually as an example of fringe speculation rather than a serious scientific hypothesis .
- Some mycologists and psychedelic advocates, such as Paul Stamets, have expressed that while the theory is not proven, it remains an entertaining or "persuasive" narrative—but they do not claim it is supported by evidence .

## Reception in Popular and Psychedelic Culture

- The theory has a strong following in psychedelic and counterculture circles, where it is often treated as a provocative or inspirational story rather than a literal scientific account .
- Some writers and thinkers have proposed revised or metaphorical versions of the theory, suggesting psychedelics might have played a role in shaping culture or consciousness, but these remain speculative and are not regarded as scientific explanations for human evolution .

## Conclusion

In summary:

- McKenna's Stoned Ape Theory is not considered a valid scientific theory or even a serious hypothesis by experts in human evolution or neuroscience .
- Its appeal is largely cultural and philosophical, not scientific. While it

continues to inspire debate and creative speculation, it remains on the fringe of scientific discourse . [3](#)

## Introduction

Reading all that has been said about McKenna's hypothesis, it becomes evident that the problem is with the scenario he constructed — the details — the when, why, how, where and using-what questions. McKenna took an interesting idea — that psychoactive plants may have played a role in the *cultural, psychological, social evolution* of our species — and pretty much ruined it through "wild speculation" as Andrew Weil called it at the First Tucson Consciousness Conference in 1996. [4](#)

Weil's dismissal — made all the more authoritative by his expertise on psychoactive drugs, was no doubt comforting to the scientific mainstream present at the Tucson conference. The substance of his comment was that experimentation with new foods, such as psychoactive plants, would not in normal circumstances have been a common occurrence, since any individual who developed a taste for frequent consciousness alteration using psychoactive plants would likely be seen as disruptive and deviant, and be shunned or expelled from the social group.

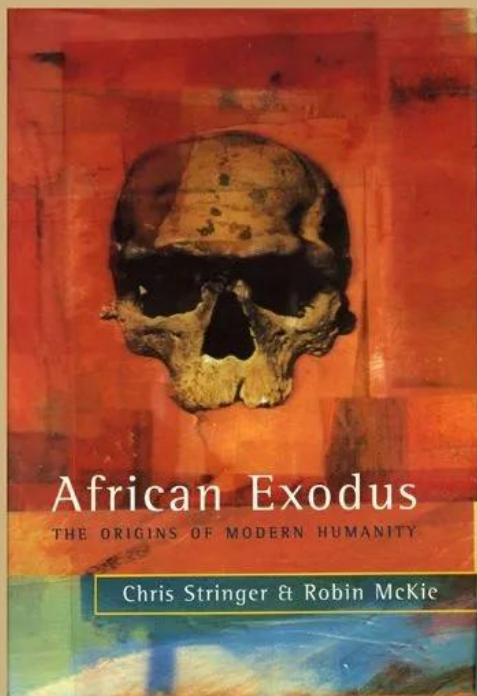
After reading *Food of the Gods* shortly after its publication, I too became rather annoyed that a seemingly good idea had been corrupted by — perhaps just the over-enthusiasm typical of many a psychedelic tripper. Nevertheless I wrote a letter to Terence, suggesting that perhaps other scenarios and psychoactive substances were possible. He was adamant, however, perhaps since his theory was already "written in stone" in *Food*.

## The Awakenings Series

The Awakenings Series has evolved into something longer and more wide-ranging than originally planned. The project has led me to some of the most interesting reading and study of recent times. And since Awakenings - Part I

was written quite some time ago, I decided to update it with a revised text and comment about the entire series.

Firstly, I think that "Stoned Apes" is a rather derogatory term, more suited to use by those who would want to dismiss and discredit the entire "wild speculation" once and for all. What happened to the proto-*H. sapiens* in question was, as I will describe, an *Awakening* from a very long and profound cognitive sleep. He was not an ape, but a fully *physically modern* human. He was not, however, *cognitively modern*, and it required a neurocognitive psychological push delivered by a pharmacological catalyst to ignite the awakening. What I propose is that the sudden change in cognitive-psychological-social development of our species about 70kya was brought about by a trigger event. As the following chapters of *Awakenings* will show, the idea of a trigger event in human evolution is not a rarity among the experts.



***"It was one of the critical events in mankind's convoluted route to evolutionary success.***

***The nature of the trigger of this great social upheaval is still hotly debated, but remains a mystery at the heart of our 'progress' as a species.***

***Was it a biological, mental or social event that sent our species rushing pell-mell towards world domination?"***

And the idea of an *awakening* for the first humans is so widespread in myth, folklore, in religious texts, and even in modern literature and film, that it

would simply not do to dismiss the entire idea as "wild". It surely is something far more deeply inter-fused with the entire human voyage, a *human universal*.

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Here, in Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey* we have as a visual stand-in for the mysterious catalyst: *The Monolith*. Note that in Clark's novel, the story is quite different, as will be discussed in Chapter VII of the Awakenings series.



First touch of The Great Mystery

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1 Food of the Gods- *The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge*, 1993 by Bantam Books

2 Since subscribing to *Perplexity AI* awhile back, I find it of increasing value for researching and writing, and it was used quite frequently for this series.

3 references given by *Perplexity AI*:

<https://skeptoid.com/episodes/4734>

<https://bibliography.maps.org/resources/download/17636>

<https://bigthink.com/the-past/a-new-spin-on-the-stoned-ape-hypothesis/>

<https://www.samwoolfe.com/2013/05/terence-mckennas-stoned-ape-theory.html>

- 4    *Toward a Science of Consciousness*, Hameroff, Kaszniak, and Scott, editors, The M.I.T. Press, 1996, p687
  - 5    Brown, Donald E., 1991, *Human Universals*, Temple University Press
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