

**Radboud University**



**Psychedelic Ego-Dissolution:  
A Phenomenological Investigation**

Research Proposal

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Jason Kyle Day, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works - including electronic media - have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

Place: Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Date: 5 July 2021

## **1. Title of research proposal**

Psychedelic Ego-Dissolution: A Phenomenological Investigation

## **2. Summary**

This research project aims to conduct a phenomenological investigation of psychedelic ego-dissolution. Induced by the ingestion of a psychedelic substance, ego-dissolution refers to the loss of one's sense of being a conscious self. This is currently the focus of nascent philosophical studies of psychedelic experience. Here, philosophers of mind have hypothesised the features of psychedelic experience that account for ego-dissolution, such as feelings of disembodiment and a distorted sense of time and space. Furthermore, Raphaël Millière and Chris Letheby argue that psychedelic ego-dissolution can be a conscious experience that lacks self-consciousness. This is a direct challenge to the contemporary phenomenologist Dan Zahavi and major figures in the history of phenomenology who claim that self-consciousness is necessary for all conscious experience.

To date, no phenomenological study of psychedelic ego-dissolution has been conducted. Moreover, recent philosophical studies have called for more extensive analysis of how subjects describe their experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution. This project will apply the phenomenological works of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to studying subjective descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution. The necessary conditions for and characteristic features of psychedelic ego-dissolution will thereby be determined. Subsequently, the dominant phenomenological view of self-consciousness will be evaluated in the case of psychedelic ego-dissolution.

## **3. Description of the proposed research**

### **a) State of the art**

In the past decade, cognitive neuroscientific and psychopharmacological research on the effects of psychedelics on the human brain has rapidly progressed (see Lawrence et al. 2021; Nutt and Carhart-Harris 2021). Here, a topic of increasing interest is “ego-dissolution” induced by the ingestion of a classic psychedelic—LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, and 5-MeO-DMT (see Lebedev et al. 2015; Nour et al. 2016; Tagliazucchi et al. 2016; Mason et al. 2020).

Ego-dissolution is “a (reversible) loss of one’s sense of self and sense of self-world boundaries” (Millière 2017, 19–20). In psychedelic experience, this is typically described by subjects in association with several highly abnormal features. These include perceptual and sensory abnormalities such as synaesthesia, feelings of disembodiment, a distortion of temporal and spatial self-location, a loss of access to self-related beliefs and autobiographical memories, and a sense of oneness with the universe (Millière 2017, 2020; Letheby and Gerrans 2017; Letheby 2020).

Responding primarily to cognitive neuroscientific research, philosophers have begun studying (i) why and how experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution occur, and (ii) whether they are conscious experiences that lack self-consciousness. This potentially challenges (iii) the dominant view in phenomenology that self-consciousness is necessary for all conscious experience.

*(i) Philosophical studies of psychedelic ego-dissolution*

Ego-dissolution has recently become the focus of philosophical studies of psychedelic experience, primarily in philosophy of mind (see Millière 2017, 2020; Letheby and Gerrans 2017; Millière et al. 2018; Letheby 2020; Sebastián 2020; Deane 2020). These studies hypothesise the features of psychedelic experience that account for ego-dissolution, generally thematising them into four categories—(1) perceptual and sensory abnormalities, (2) loss of bodily awareness and embodied sense of self, (3) disruption of spatial and temporal self-location, and (4) loss of mental awareness and narrative sense of self. Psychedelic ego-dissolution is accordingly understood as a multifaceted experience that does not occur independently of other features (Millière 2017; Millière et al. 2018). It is also not understood as an “all or nothing affair” (Letheby and Gerrans 2017, 6) but rather as occurring to different degrees depending on variables such as substance, dosage, and environment.

Current philosophical studies acknowledge their limitation to insufficient sources of evidence. This includes neuroimaging studies of the neural correlates of ego-dissolution. However, reducing a sense of self to neural activity is questionable (Millière 2017, 9) and neuroimaging studies cannot explain what it is like for a subject to experience ego-dissolution. Reports of subjective experience gathered by psychometric questionnaires have also been referenced (see Nour et al. 2016). These questionnaires do not sufficiently discriminate between different degrees and aspects of ego-dissolution (Millière 2017, 3; Letheby 2020, 9), and only require subjects to quantitatively rate aspects of their experience. Very little

qualitative detail about the experience is thereby provided. Anecdotal self-reports on online databases have also been consulted for qualitative descriptions, but their reliability is uncertain (Millière et al. 2020, 34; Amada et al. 2020).

A significant need is thus recognised for extensive analysis of subjective, qualitative descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution (Millière 2017, 2020; Letheby and Gerrans 2017; Millière et al. 2018; Letheby 2020; Sebastián 2020; Deane 2020). Each cited study proposes using micro-phenomenological interviews to gather descriptions. Here, an interviewer poses open questions that focus the subject on providing finely-grained, qualitative descriptions of their experience (Petitmengin 2006).

### *(ii) The self-consciousness controversy*

Raphaël Millière (2020) and Chris Letheby (2020) argue that experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution can completely lack self-consciousness and yet are conscious experiences with phenomenal content. They thereby challenge a claim most famously made by the contemporary phenomenologist Dan Zahavi (1999, 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2020) and similarly by other philosophers (Kriegel 2009; Strawson 2009, 2011, 2017; Nida-Rümelin 2017). This claim can be summarised as follows: self-consciousness is a necessary condition for consciousness; there can therefore be no conscious experience that lacks self-consciousness.

Zahavi specifically argues for minimal self-consciousness as “pre-reflective self-consciousness” or “experiential for-me-ness” (Zahavi and Kriegel 2016; Zahavi 2020). This denotes an implicit, non-cognitive and immediate sense of being a conscious self that fundamentally structures all conscious experience. Zahavi has not responded to the assertion that psychedelic ego-dissolution can be a conscious experience that lacks self-consciousness, and that this disproves his claim that self-consciousness is the necessary condition for and universal feature of consciousness.

### *(iii) Phenomenology and psychedelic ego-dissolution*

Phenomenology is a discipline of philosophy dedicated to studying the nature of human consciousness and how the world appears therein, and to doing so by methodically studying subjective, first-person experience. As Zahavi (2006) details, every major figure in the history of phenomenology has asserted that self-consciousness is the necessary condition for and universal feature of

consciousness. This includes Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

However, in the history of phenomenology, no dedicated study of psychedelic experience or ego-dissolution has been undertaken. Only Merleau-Ponty has, very briefly, analysed psychedelic experience (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 237–39, 293–96, 349–60). Although he does not directly address ego-dissolution, Merleau-Ponty makes several pertinent remarks. He notes that a distorted perception of space is related to the abnormal way in which the body operates and is depersonalised in psychedelic experience, and that psychedelic and schizophrenic hallucinations show that “we must surely deny perceptual consciousness full self-possession” and that “I only know myself in ambiguity” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 360).

In contemporary phenomenology, only a handful of articles have been published on psychedelic experience (see Szabó, Horváth and Szummer 2014; Szummer et al. 2017; Horváth, Szummer, and Szabó 2018). These articles do not extensively analyse subjective descriptions, insufficiently classify psychedelic experience in terms of visions and imagination, and do not address ego-dissolution.

In summary, philosophical research on psychedelic ego-dissolution is a growing field that requires more extensive study of subjective experience. Moreover, the claim dominantly made by phenomenologists that self-consciousness is a necessary condition for and universal feature of consciousness is challenged by recent philosophical research on psychedelic ego-dissolution (Millière 2020; Letheby 2020). Yet there is no phenomenological study of psychedelic ego-dissolution to respond to this challenge.

## **b) Aims and research questions**

The aim of this research project is to contribute to philosophical research on psychedelic ego-dissolution by conducting a novel phenomenological investigation. Research will be conducted by applying the phenomenological works of Husserl (e.g., Husserl 1960, 1970, 2012) and Merleau-Ponty (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1968, 2002, 2014) to an analysis of how subjects describe their experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution. These descriptions will be obtained from publications in philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience and psychopharmacology. Since no extensive research has been conducted on psychedelic ego-dissolution in philosophy or any other single discipline, descriptions and studies of this experience must be consulted from publications in numerous disciplines.

The research question of this project is twofold:

1. What are the necessary conditions for and characteristic features of psychedelic ego-dissolution?
2. Can experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution lack self-consciousness, or are such experiences characterised only by a radically minimal form of self-consciousness?

The project is divided into three parts corresponding to three chapters of the PhD dissertation. Part 1 aims to establish the key phenomenological methods and studies in the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty that will be applied to analysing psychedelic ego-dissolution. This first entails a discussion of how phenomenologists methodically delimit consciousness as their field of research and analyse different modes, acts and objects of consciousness. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's studies of themes pertinent to psychedelic ego-dissolution will then be discussed. This includes studies of perception and sensory experience, temporality and spatiality, embodiment, and subjectivity.

Part 2 aims to apply phenomenological methods and studies to determining the necessary conditions for and characteristic features of psychedelic ego-dissolution. This involves determining whether psychedelic ego-dissolution occurs in the same general way across the psychedelics that induce it, and whether the features associated with it occur in a particular order and relationship. Part 2 will be divided into four thematic sections, with each addressing a set of features associated with psychedelic ego-dissolution—(1) perceptual and sensory abnormalities, (2) loss of bodily awareness and embodied sense of self, (3) disruption of spatial and temporal self-location, and (4) loss of mental awareness and narrative sense of self.

Part 3 aims to determine whether experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution can lack self-consciousness. First, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological accounts of self-consciousness will be discussed. The aim here is to accordingly evaluate Zahavi's claim that both phenomenologists share his view of self-consciousness. Second, a determination will be made as to (1) whether the claim that self-consciousness is a necessary condition of and universal feature of all conscious experience is valid, and (2) whether the arguments made by Millière and Letheby that psychedelic ego-dissolution can be a conscious experience that lacks self-consciousness is a valid counter-claim.

### c) Methods

A phenomenological method of studying consciousness will be applied to analysing subjective descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution. This method consists of the following steps, as defined by Husserl. First, the epoché is performed. This denotes a suspension of all beliefs and judgements concerning human consciousness in relation to the existence of the world, the validity or invalidity of experiences, and all interests pertaining to practical, social, or aesthetic values. It is a subject of ongoing debate as to what extent the epoché is necessary for phenomenological analysis and how Merleau-Ponty applied it (see Smith 2005; Overgaard 2015; Zahavi 2019). In this research project, performing the epoché at least establishes that no evidence or explanation of psychedelic ego-dissolution will be considered that is not derived from subjective descriptions of the experience. This first entails that judgement will be suspended as to whether psychedelic ego-dissolution actually occurs or is instead mistakenly reported by subjects. This must be determined upon analysing their descriptions, and without presupposing the possibility of ego-dissolution according to any pre-established theory. Second, psychedelic ego-dissolution will not be analysed with reference to the chemical effects of psychedelics on neural activity.

The epoché is followed by the transcendental reduction which delimits subjective experience as the exclusive field of phenomenological research. This means focusing analysis solely on the various ways in which the subject describes experiencing the world (such as in perception, apperception, recollection, imagination, and expectation), the various manners in which the world and its objects (including other subjects) appeared to them, and how, through all this, they experienced alterations to their sense of self and even a lack of self-consciousness.

The subsequent task is to determine whether psychedelic ego-dissolution has necessary conditions and characteristic features (the aim of Part 2), and whether it can be a conscious experience that lacks self-consciousness (the primary aim of Part 3). The most commonly reported features associated with psychedelic ego-dissolution will be identified and categorised according to the aforementioned four thematic sections. In order to explain why they occur and how they contribute to ego-dissolution, these categorised features will be analysed with reference to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's aforesaid studies of themes pertinent to psychedelic ego-dissolution.

The findings of this analysis will thereafter be applied to determining the validity of the dominant phenomenological claim that self-consciousness is the necessary condition for and universal feature of consciousness, as well as the validity of the



counter-claim that psychedelic ego-dissolution disproves this (the second aim of Part 3).

In order to gather subjective descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution for phenomenological analysis, a literature review will be conducted. This entails identifying in published literature the features that are common to all descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution, categorising these features, and then analysing them by the above phenomenological method. Literature will be selected primarily for its publication of subjective descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution and related features, and secondarily for scholarly accounts as a supplement to the study.

Literature will be reviewed from the following fields, with key references indicated: phenomenology and philosophy of mind (Merleau-Ponty 2014; Millière 2017, 2020; Letheby and Gerrans 2017; Millière et al. 2018; Letheby 2020; Amada et al. 2020), psychology and psychiatry (Savage 1955; Shanon 2002), anthropology (Wolff 2020), and cognitive neuroscience and psychopharmacology (Griffiths et al. 2006; Lebedev et al. 2015; Nour et al. 2016; Tagliazucchi et al. 2016; Timmermann et al. 2018).

First-hand, qualitative descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution will be prioritised for analysis. However, these descriptions will be cross-referenced with subjective reports that have been gathered by means of psychometric questionnaires in quantitative studies. This will allow for the pervasiveness of qualitatively described features of psychedelic ego-dissolution to be quantitatively supported, and will provide quantitative data with qualitative explanations.

Further empirical research is needed on the subjective experience of psychedelic ego-dissolution. However, this is beyond the scope of this project, which will instead conduct conceptual and qualitative research. This means that the project's aim is to explain—in phenomenological terms—why, how, and to what extent psychedelic ego-dissolution occurs on the basis of published descriptions, rather than to gather new data that will be in need of this explanatory basis to be effectively interpreted.

The value of the above phenomenological approach is twofold. First, current philosophical literature identifies the need for extensive analysis of subjective descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution. As this experience is highly abnormal, a significant difficulty is also acknowledged in interpreting these descriptions (Millière et al. 2018, 21). Husserl has developed, and Merleau-Ponty has applied and elaborated upon, a specific method for analysing subjective experience in a rigorous and reliable manner. They thus provide an established

method that can be readily applied to analysing descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution. Both phenomenologists also present a corpus of studies on themes that are pertinent to interpreting the results of this analysis.

Second, psychedelic ego-dissolution is presented as a challenge to the dominant phenomenological claim that self-consciousness is the necessary condition for and universal feature of consciousness. The advantage of a phenomenological approach to psychedelic ego-dissolution is therefore that it will be possible to evaluate the phenomenological claim on phenomenological terms and with results gained by phenomenological methods.

#### **d) Scientific and social relevance**

This project contributes to philosophical research on psychedelic ego-dissolution by addressing the need for extensive study of subjective descriptions of this experience. The results of this analysis, which entail categorising and explaining the features that constitute psychedelic ego-dissolution, can furthermore serve as a guideline for researchers to interpret the empirical data gained from micro-phenomenological interviews.

This project will also fill the gap in research that exists in phenomenology on both psychedelic experience and ego-dissolution. It will furthermore address the lack of a phenomenological response to claims that psychedelic ego-dissolution disproves the dominant phenomenological view of self-consciousness.

The results of this project are also relevant to cognitive neuroscientific research and psychiatric studies, since it has here been recognised that a focused account of subjective psychedelic experience is needed for neuroscientists and psychiatrists to understand the experiential reports of their subjects (Carhart-Harris 2018, 170).

The project also has distinct societal relevance. The current surge of research on psychedelics in cognitive neuroscience has catalysed significant popular interest in psychedelic experience and ego-dissolution. However, there are few resources to which the public can turn in order to make sense of these experiences. This project can serve as a resource for future efforts to provide accessible information to the public on this topic.

#### **4. Key words**

psychedelic experience, ego-dissolution, phenomenology, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty

## 5. Timetable

Academic Year	Research and Education	Output
Year 1		
Months 1–6	<p>PhD course on research methodology.</p> <p>Study Husserl's development and Merleau-Ponty's application of the phenomenological method.</p> <p>Consult contemporary secondary literature on and criticisms of the phenomenological method.</p>	Introduction to the dissertation.
Months 6–12	<p>Analyse Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's studies of themes pertinent to psychedelic ego-dissolution.</p> <p>Define the steps by which the phenomenological method will be applied to studying psychedelic ego-dissolution.</p>	Chapter 1 of the dissertation.
Year 2		
Months 1–6	<p>Select relevant corpus of literature in which subjective descriptions of psychedelic ego-dissolution have been published.</p> <p>Analyse literature in order to categorise features associated with psychedelic ego-dissolution into four thematic sections.</p>	
Months 6–12	Apply the works of Husserl and Merleau-	Chapter 2 of the dissertation, thematic

	Ponty to determining the necessary conditions for and characteristic features of psychedelic ego-dissolution—focus on (1) perceptual and sensory abnormalities and (2) loss of bodily awareness and embodied sense of self.	sections 1–2.
Year 3		
Months 1–6	Apply the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to determining the necessary conditions for and characteristic features of psychedelic ego-dissolution—focus on (3) disruption of temporal and spatial self-location, and (4) loss of mental awareness and narrative sense of self.	Chapter 2 of the dissertation, thematic sections 3–4.
Months 6–12	Analyse Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of self-consciousness and subjectivity—determine whether or not they each hold the view that self-consciousness is necessary for all conscious experience.  Evaluate Zahavi’s publications on self-consciousness according to preceding analysis of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of self-consciousness.	Part 1 of Chapter 3 of the dissertation.
Year 4		
Months 1–6	Analyse philosophical literature on psychedelic ego-dissolution that is critical of the phenomenological view of self-consciousness—focus	Part 2 of Chapter 3 of the dissertation.

	on Millière and Letheby.  Determine whether psychedelic ego-dissolution can entail a lack of self-consciousness according to the findings of the project.	
Months 6–12	Edit dissertation and incorporate final feedback.	Conclusion of the dissertation.  Complete dissertation

## 6. Summary for non-specialists

We are living through a psychedelic renaissance. The past decade has seen a surge in scientific research on the effects of psychedelics on the human brain. Here, ego-dissolution induced by the ingestion of psychedelic drugs—LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, and 5-MeO-DMT—has become a topic of central interest. Psychedelic ego-dissolution refers to a loss of one’s sense or awareness of being a conscious self and of being distinct from the world and other subjects. This is often described by subjects in association with a range of highly abnormal features. These include hallucinations, synaesthesia, distortion of time and space, feelings of disembodiment, a loss of autobiographical memories, and a sense of oneness with the universe.

In response to the psychedelic renaissance, new philosophical studies on psychedelic experience have become focused on the topic of ego-dissolution. Philosophers of mind have begun to hypothesise the features of psychedelic experience that account for ego-dissolution, and have called for more extensive study of how subjects describe this experience. Among these philosophers, Raphaël Millière and Chris Letheby have proposed that experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution can lack self-consciousness. This directly challenges a claim about self-consciousness that is dominant in the philosophical field of phenomenology and is currently made by the contemporary phenomenologist Dan Zahavi, that is, that self-consciousness is necessary for and fundamental to all conscious experience.

Founded by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is a discipline of philosophy that is dedicated to studying the nature of human consciousness and how the experienced

world appears to us. Thus far, no phenomenological studies have been conducted on the topic of psychedelic ego-dissolution. The aim of this research project is to conduct a novel phenomenological study of psychedelic ego-dissolution in order to answer the following two questions: what are the necessary conditions for and characteristic features of psychedelic ego-dissolution? Can an experience of psychedelic ego-dissolution completely lack self-consciousness? These questions will be answered by applying the phenomenological methods and studies of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to analysing how subjects describe their experiences of psychedelic ego-dissolution. These descriptions will be analysed from published literature in the fields of philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience and psychopharmacology.

Answering the above two questions is highly important for several reasons. First, the nature of the self has remained one of the most central problems for philosophers throughout history. By studying psychedelic ego-dissolution, new insights can be gained into how it is possible for humans to have a sense of self and whether self-consciousness is really essential to all human experience as phenomenologists claim. Second, cognitive neuroscientists have identified remarkable changes to neural activity correlated to the experience of psychedelic ego-dissolution. However, they require in-depth studies of the experience, which this project will provide, in order to better understand the experiential reports given to them by subjects. Finally, popular interest in psychedelic ego-dissolution is growing considerably even though reliable information on it is severely lacking. This project can further serve as a resource for future efforts to provide reliable information to the public on this topic.

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## 8. Curriculum vitae

### a) Education

sep19-	ReMA History of Philosophy
	Radboud University Nijmegen
	Interim GPA: 8.5 (Expected graduation date: 31-08-2021)
feb18-nov18	BA Honours Philosophy
	University of Pretoria
	GPA: 8.5 (cum laude)
feb15-nov17	BA English Studies
	University of Pretoria
	GPA: 8

Language competence:

English (mother tongue), Afrikaans, French (B1), Dutch (B1),  
German (A2), Sanskrit

**b) Relevant academic experience**

- sep19- English language editor, PhD Dissertation  
Center for Contemporary European Philosophy
- sep19- Maintenance editor of website  
Center for Contemporary European Philosophy
- sep20-dec20 Teaching Assistant “Ethics for Psychologists”  
Radboud University Nijmegen
- jan18-jul19 Chairperson of the Footnotes Philosophical Society  
University of Pretoria
- jan19-apr19 Organising committee for the conference “Decolonization and  
Alterity: Intersecting Theories and Praxis”  
The Postgraduate Philosophical Association of South Africa
- feb17-jun19 Teaching Assistant “Metaphysics and Epistemology”, “Ethics and  
Moral Philosophy”, “Philosophy of Science”, “Business Ethics”  
University of Pretoria

**c) Other relevant positions**

- mar21- Co-editor of the online publication *The Anarchist Lantern*

feb19-jul19 Part-time Coach of the South African Debate Team

aug16-jul19 Lecturer and Teaching Assistant for Advanced Program English

#### **d) Output**

##### *(i) Written publications*

Day, Jason. 2020. "Two Houses: Chance and the Analogy of the Architect in Darwin and Hume." *Splijstof* 49 (2): 9–20.

Day, Jason, and Michael Grooff. 2019. "English Review—Pronouns and Peterson: The Fallout over Gender and Speech." <https://www.ru.nl/radboudreflects/terugblik/terugblik-2019/terugblik-2019/19-11-04-the-rise-jordan-peterson-film-discussion/info/english-review-pronouns-and-peterson-the-fallout/>.

##### *(ii) Talks*

Day, Jason. 2020. "Husserl, the Buddha, and the End of Philosophy." The 18th Nijmegen-Groningen Colloquium, Radboud University Nijmegen.

Day, Jason. 2019. "Applying the Logic of Nāgārjuna to Critical Complexity Theory." Philosophy in/of Translation, the Philosophical Society of South Africa, University of Pretoria.

Day, Jason. 2018. "Fanon and Nietzsche on the Body of History." Decolonisation and Alterity: Intersecting Theories and Praxis, the Postgraduate Philosophical Association of South Africa, University of Pretoria.

**e) Academic awards and scholarships**

sep19-	Orange Tulip Scholarship
sep19-	Faculty Scholarship for the Research Master's in Philosophy, Radboud University Nijmegen
nov18	Dean's Merit List, University of Pretoria
nov18	Postgraduate Honours Merit Award, University of Pretoria
nov17	Pearson Award for the Highest Achieving BA English Studies Graduate
2015 –2018	Golden Key International Honour Society Award Recipient
feb18-	Tutor Achievement Award, University of Pretoria