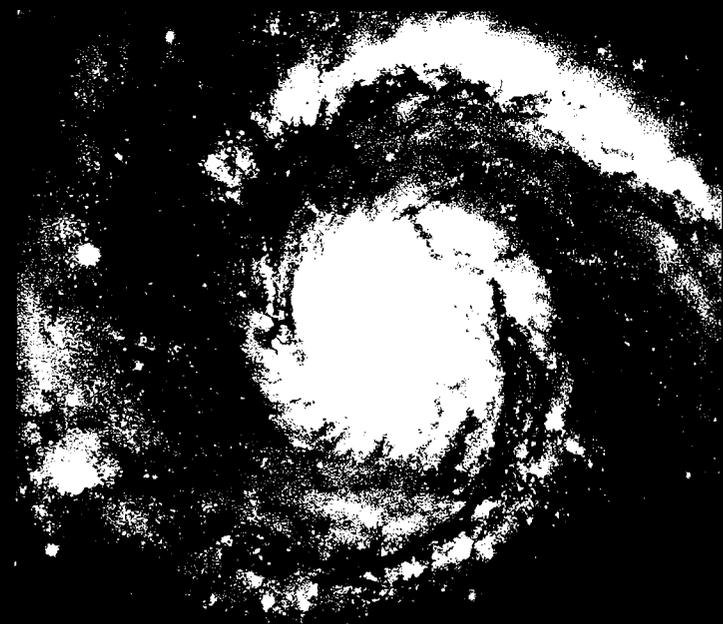


Journal of Consciousness Studies

*controversies in science
& the humanities*

Volume 13, No.4 (2006)



Offprint

Journal of Consciousness Studies

Executive Editors

Joseph A. Goguen, Editor in Chief, UC San Diego: goguen@cs.ucsd.edu
Robert K.C. Forman, Director, The Forge Institute: Forman@TheForge.org
Keith Sutherland, Publisher, Imprint Academic: keith@imprint.co.uk

Managing Editor

(address for submissions and books for review)

Anthony Freeman, Imprint Academic, PO Box 200, Exeter EX5 5YX, UK.
Tel: +44 1392 841600. Email: anthony@imprint.co.uk

Book Reviews Editor

Chris Nunn: cmhunn@btinternet.com

Associate Editors

Jean Burns: jeanbur@earthlink.net; **Ivo Mosley** (Poetry): ivomosley@aol.com
Jonathan Shear: jcs@infionline.net

Editorial Advisory Board

Bernard J. Baars, Neurosciences Institute; **David Chalmers**, Australian National University; **Ewert Cousins**, Fordham University; **Daniel Dennett**, Tufts University; **Margaret Donaldson**, Edinburgh University; **Peter Fenwick**, Maudsley Hospital; **Brian Goodwin**, Schumacher College; **Stuart Hameroff**, University of Arizona; **Erich Harth**, Syracuse University; **Jeremy Hayward**, Naropa Institute; **Basil Hiley**, Birkbeck College; **Nicholas Humphrey**, London School of Economics; **Piet Hut**, Institute for Advanced Studies; **Robert Kenrick**, University of Durham; **Christof Koch**, CalTech; **George Lakoff**, UC, Berkeley; **Benjamin Libet**, UC, San Francisco; **Philip Merikle**, University of Waterloo; **Mary Midgley**, University of Newcastle; **Raimon Panikkar**, UC, Santa Barbara; **Roger Penrose**, Oxford University; **Geraint Rees**, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience; **Eleanor Rosch**, UC, Berkeley; **David Rosenthal**, CUNY; **John Searle**, UC, Berkeley; **Huston Smith**, Syracuse University; **Susan Leigh Star**, UC, San Diego; **Roger Walsh**, UC, Irvine; **Arthur Zajonc**, Amherst College.

Manuscript Submissions

For style guide and other directions for authors go to the journal's website, imprint-academic.com/jcs

Subscription and Ordering Information (order form on inside back cover)

Annual Subscription Rates for 2006 (12 monthly issues):

Individuals: \$121/£64 **Institutions:** \$418/£220

Prices for print journal and include accelerated delivery (UK/USA), surface mail rest of world, and free access to the journal online at Ingenta.com

Orders to : Imprint Academic, PO Box 200, Exeter EX5 5YX, UK.
Tel: +44 1392 841600; Fax: 841478; Email: sandra@imprint.co.uk

Cheques (£ or \$US 'Imprint Academic'); VISA/AMEX/MASTERCARD

 imprint-academic.com

Charles T. Tart

Current Status of Transpersonal Psychology

Anthony Freeman, in his stimulating and valuable article 'A Daniel Come to Judgment? Dennett and the Revisioning of Transpersonal Theory' in the last issue of this journal (Freeman, 2006), outlines the current state of transpersonal psychology, noting theoretical problems, and speculating on how Dennett's heterophenomenology might help in understanding the transpersonal. The reader who is not well acquainted with transpersonal psychology, however, may come away from this article with the feeling that the field is rife with inherent contradictions and is making no progress.

As one of the founders of transpersonal psychology, I want to reassure *JCS* readers that the discipline is actually alive and well, and progress is being made (albeit much too slowly for my impatient nature and my feelings about the importance of the material!).

Conceptual Problems

It's certainly true that there is no lack of conceptual problems in the field. Indeed, given the centrality of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in transpersonal experiences, and the state-specific knowledge thereby inherently involved, conceptual problems (within the limits of ordinary consciousness functioning) are guaranteed. I'll take a deeper look at this below. Meanwhile, my personal maxim for keeping mental sanity (and being scientific) when the conceptual world gets overly complicated, has long been:

Reality will be what it is and do what it does regardless of what we think or don't think, feel or don't feel, about it.

Correspondence: Charles T. Tart, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 1069 E. Meadow Circle, Palo Alto, CA 94303, USA. Email: cttart@ucdavis.edu

I often supplement this with the operating rule:

Remember to chuckle when you see how you and your friends have tied yourself in mental knots. ☺

The reality of interest in this case is that actual people do have a wide variety of extraordinary experiences, many of which drastically transform their beliefs about themselves and the world, and change their mode of living. We might put this, to give just one specific example, as, generally speaking: 'One near-death experience (NDE) can change a person much more than decades of philosophical and scholarly education and reflection.'

I am not questioning the great value of rational thought about transpersonal issues. I am delighted that brilliant thinkers like Wilber and Ferrer devote themselves to exploring conceptual foundations, for appropriate interplay of theory and data are what usually lead to advances in understanding and application. But for us intellectuals — and I would be greatly surprised if anyone reading *JCS* was not extremely intellectual in almost all things — there is always a danger that we get mentally and emotionally intoxicated with ideas and theories and, drunk with this special kind of delight, lose sight of the realities the theories are supposed to be useful in explaining and working with. I certainly have a strong tendency to be an intellectual drunk, and my own personal growth as well as my scientific work has centred around efforts to come back to immediate realities and perceptions ...

Essential, Empirical Science

What I have always admired about essential science is its insistence that *data* — observation, direct experience — is *always* primary, *always* takes precedence over theory. You make some observations and come up with a theory. The theory may be 'sophisticated', 'elegant', 'intuitively obvious', 'parsimonious', 'fashionable', etc., etc. — substitute your favourite high prestige adjectives here — and it feels so satisfying to be so smart as to come up with such a wonderful theory! But essential science requires that you then make predictions from your theory and test these predictions back in the data world. If your theory says 'If A, then B', and then you set up A and B does not occur ... it's too bad for your theory, no matter how obviously profound, elegant, etc. it is.

Transpersonal Psychology Has Just Started!

While transcendent experiences have undoubtedly happened to people throughout the entire life of the human race, as a field of scholarly and scientific study, transpersonal psychology is very young. My *Altered States of Consciousness* book, for example, and the first issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* appeared in 1969, and my *Transpersonal Psychologies* book, one of the first to start putting scattered threads in the field together, came out in 1975. We are still far from a comprehensive and accurate mapping of all the possible transpersonal experiences people can have: our data are preliminary and quite incomplete.

So is it any wonder that transpersonal psychology has many different theories and that these theories are, I'm sure, quite crude compared to what we hope we will understand in the future? Sciences that have been developed for hundreds of years, like chemistry and physics, have much more elaborate and sophisticated theoretical superstructures, of course — although there is often still fundamental disagreement on some things and today's 'final' theory may be completely superseded in a couple of generations. So is it surprising that transpersonal psychology's theories are still crude and incomplete? Are there any examples of other sciences that had relatively complete theories within their first 30 or 40 years and that didn't change after that?

Conclusion 1: Relax!

So one of my primary points, in reflecting on Freeman's article, is: Relax, folks, it's very early in the game. It's nice to have better theories and resolve contradictions, but it's much more important in transpersonal psychology to get a larger and more accurate data base, and, given the importance of transpersonal experiences to those who have them, to research such questions as, for example: (a) how to induce healthy transpersonal experiences, (b) how to maximize healthy integration of transpersonal experiences into everyday life, and (c) how to treat and minimize transpersonal pathology (everything that appears transcendent is not necessarily true or healthy).

Conclusion 2: State-Specificity

My second primary point, which I shall mention only briefly here as I have dealt with it extensively elsewhere (Tart, 1972), is to amplify my statement above that for the field of transpersonal psychology, 'given the centrality of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in

transpersonal experiences and the state-specific knowledge thereby inherently involved, conceptual problems (within the limits of ordinary consciousness functioning) are guaranteed.'

The implicit operating assumption we almost all make all the time is that (1) we possess 'ordinary' or 'normal' consciousness, (2) such consciousness can be smart and logical, and so (3) we can eventually understand anything and everything in our ordinary state of consciousness. In terms of its consequences, that's usually a fine assumption: we are motivated to figure things out and often we do an excellent job in advancing our understanding and control of the world. Assumptions that become implicit and automatic, though, can seriously limit us.

To consider just one exception, some people who have experienced various ASCs believe, as a result of their direct experience, that:

Our ordinary waking consciousness ... 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. We may go through life without suspecting their existence: but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are all there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question — for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. (William James, 1902, p. 388)

It is *data* that some people experience different styles or modes of thinking while in ASCs, and the experiential emphasis is on *different*, not merely an inferior form of 'reasoning' compared to ordinary consciousness. My 1972 proposal that we try to create *state-specific sciences* was based on this observation.

For the purposes of experiment, accept the idea of state-specific knowledge (you must be in a certain ASC to observe certain kinds of data) and state-specific logics and apply the rules of essential science. Refine your data (in the ASC). Theorize about your data (in the ASC). Make and test predictions (in the ASC). Communicate (in the ASC) to peers and colleagues, let them check and expand your observations, theories and predictions. See what happens. Do we get more understanding and control over the relevant phenomena? If so, we're on to something. If not ... well a lot of scientific endeavours don't pan out, so go somewhere else. And while much of this may be inherently

state-specific, some of it may appear that way but not be, so see how much can be adequately communicated and understood in ordinary consciousness.

Action

So some folks wrestle with the incompleteness and inconsistencies in our currently crude, ordinary-state theories of the transpersonal. Good luck to them! If they can clarify things in ways that lead to better understanding and application of transpersonal experiences, great!

Meanwhile, as an empiricist, I look for better data and recognize the need for state-specific expansions of our knowledge. And, in practical reality, the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology where I teach continues to enrol more and more students, whose dissertations continue to win awards, and whose clinical students keep getting praised on their people skills. Not exactly a sign of a dying field ...

References

- Freeman, Anthony (2006), 'A Danjel come to judgment? Dennett and the revisioning of transpersonal theory', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 13 (3), pp. 95-109.
- James, William (1902), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longman).
- Tart, C.T. (ed. 1969), *Altered States of Consciousness* (New York: Wiley).
- Tart, C.T. (1972), 'States of consciousness and state-specific sciences', *Science*, 176, pp. 1203-10.
- Tart, C.T. (1975), *Transpersonal Psychologies* (San Francisco: Harper Row).