LIVING IN ILLUSION

When people try to understand the mind, they frequently do so by drawing analogies between it and the most sophisticated technologies of their time. Thus we have had hydraulic models of the mind, where emotional intensity is like pressure in a pipe, for example, or chemical models, where the intensity of feelings is a function of the "chemical potentials" of the elements going into it. In our times the computer is our most sophisticated technology, so computer models of mental functioning are fashionable.

All of these analogies are just that: analogies, not real descriptions of the mind. Models are frequently confused with reality, but as long as we avoid this confusion we can learn a lot about the way our minds work. In this article I shall lay a foundation for understanding a concept found in the transpersonal psychologies, namely that we live in an illusory world instead of in the real world.

Let us assume that the most important aspects of brain functioning are analogous to the functioning of a computer. Indeed we shall treat brains and computers as identical to sharpen the discussion for now, even though I am sure that some aspects of mind cannot be reduced to brain functioning. The neurons in the brain are thus like the electronic switches in a computer, interconnected groups of neurons are like the circuits in a computer. The brain is the "hardware" of the mind, thoughts and feelings are the "software," the particular programs and sets of instructions which control how the physical structure of the brain works. Now we ask two interesting questions:

"What is consciousness?"

"What is consciousness conscious of?"

At ordinary levels of discussion, the answer to "What is consciousness?" is straightforward: it is the pattern of electrical-chemical impulses operating in a particular set of circuits, the computer-brain. The specific functioning of the computer-brain at any instant is a matter of where electrical-chemical impulses are, what circuits they are activating, at that instant. Computation, "thinking," consists of the movement of electrical-chemical impulses into different patterns in the computer-brain's circuits. Any state of the computer-brain, any "sensation" or "thought" in it, can be specified and understood exactly by the distribution of electrical-chemical impulses in the computer-brain's circuits. For the computer-brain, consciousness is its electrical-chemical state.

As to what the computer-brain is conscious of, the answer is again straightforward: it is conscious of electrical-chemical impulses. It does not directly see real objects in the external world. Rather such objects, entering the field of vision of our eyes cause a pattern of electrical-chemical impulses to be produced and sent to the computer-brain, and it is this pattern which the computer is conscious of. The computer has no direct perception of anything in the real world, but only of electrical-chemical patterns that are associated with and caused by events and objects in the real world.

What is Hot, Red, Beautiful and Dangerous?

Suppose you are looking at a fire. You experience it as red in color, you feel the heat from it on your skin. If the fire is threatening you or your possessions, you perceive it as dangerous. In another situation and mood you might perceive it as beautiful.
These seem like direct perceptions of external reality, but our modern understanding of brain functioning tells us that it is not really direct, but mediated by many intermediate processes, each one of which can alter the nature of what we perceive.

The fire is not "red" or "hot" or "dangerous" or "beautiful" in any absolute sense: for us it is only a certain pattern of electrical-chemical impulses stimulating our eyes and our skin.

Consider the experience of the fire being perceived as red. We believe we understand the physical world well enough to be certain that the fire is emitting electromagnetic radiation. Some of this radiation is in a vibratory range that can stimulate the human eye, so radiation in this range is called light. Light of a particular frequency does not have any attributes of color in and of itself though; it is just vibrating at that particular rate.

The radiation strikes special structures on your retina, the cones, which are responsible for color vision. The energy of the light stimulates electrochemical changes in the cones, such that the particular vibratory frequency of the light hitting the cones sends out a particular pattern of electrical-chemical impulses, nerve impulses, that travel up special nerves from the eye to the brain. The brain modifies these nerve impulses in complex ways that we don't fully understand, and, in what is the biggest mystery of all, the final pattern of electrochemical impulses in the brain results in our perception-experience of the fire as red. It is the structure and activity of the brain and eyes that construct the experience of red, rather than red being a property of the outside world.

You have probably seen those oddly colored computer-processed photographs taken by special earth-sensing satellites. Water may appear as shades of red, vegetation as shades of blue, bare earth as shade of green. Such photographs are usually labeled "false color" photographs. But there is nothing "false" in an absolute sense about these colors. Computer processing of photographs involves just the same kind of relatively arbitrary simulation of the outside world that your brain carries out. Your brain could just as well, and just as usefully, construct the sight of fire as the experience of green or blue instead of the experience of red. The construction-simulation process enables us to survive in the world when there is a regular, dependable correspondence between some feature of the outside world and your constructed perception of it. If ordinary fires were always green, that would be fine.

The colors in a computer-processed photo, then, are not false colors; they are simply not simulated or constructed, in accordance with the usual human visual system standards. The redness you directly experience when looking at a fire is an arbitrary construction of your brain. Similarly "hotness" could be constructed by the computer-brain so that it would be experienced with the sensations we now think of as coldness. As long as the relation of the experience of coldness to objects and processes associated with higher temperatures in the outside world held constant, so you knew things that felt cold would burn you, it would be just as useful to our survival as the present experience of hotness being associated with high temperature objects.

Similarly, the "dangerousness" or the "beauty" of the fire you see are semi-arbitrary constructions of your brain, not direct properties of the outside world. Indeed, these two qualities involve even more complex construction-activity on the part of the brain than redness or hotness, for emotional evaluation of the outside world has now been added to the construction-simulation of the object itself. We can see a fire as a fire and then separately decide it's dangerous or beautiful, but often we instantly see a dangerous fire or a beautiful fire.

What we are directly aware of, then, are the constructions-simulations of our brains, not outside reality itself. We, our consciousness, "live in" a world simulator, rather than living directly in physical reality itself.

Simulation

To realize that living in a simulator does not mean some kind of vague, imaginary state, recall how simulators are now commonly used in training. To learn to fly a plane is a difficult and dangerous process. After the initial classroom instruction, you get in a real plane and take off. An instructor may guide you at first, and try to compensate for any mistakes you make, but eventually you fly by yourself. Rare emergencies may happen that never came up in training, like sudden clear air turbulence. A mistake may be fatal to you and your passengers.

So you train in a simulator. From the outside...
side it is a big box mounted in a framework, and it looks nothing like an airplane. Inside it looks exactly like the cockpit of the plane you are learning to fly. The view through the windscreen is of an airport runway. When you start the engines you hear them rev up, and you see their speed indicated on the instruments. As you begin to taxi you feel the forward acceleration of the plane, and you see through the windscreen that you are moving down the runway.

The tower gives you clearance to take off. You feel the acceleration as you gun the engines for takeoff and the runway falls away beneath you as you feel the nose of the plane come up. Soon you have forgotten the intellectual, abstract knowledge that you are in a simulator. It's too real. You are busy practicing your piloting skills.

Suddenly a flock of birds comes at you just as the plane has started to lift. One flies into an engine, there is the sound of an explosion. Your instruments show a fire in that engine and show a loss of power and altitude, the plane starts to slip sideways. You must apply what you've learned instantly to save yourself! Oops!! Too late! You feel the shock of impact as a wing tips and hits, etc., etc. You have just failed a test. But you're still alive to practice again. Simulators like this are expensive, but it's a lot better way to train pilots than putting them in real planes. But the simulator is "real" while you are flying it: your computer-brain is fed enough realistic cues so you perceive yourself as being in a real plane cockpit.

Similarly in everyday life we live in a simulator: the computer-brain is taking input from physical reality and constructing a simulation of our world that we naively believe is reality. Usually we believe it does a good job, that is, it creates a simulation that mirrors the external world with great fidelity. A great deal of the time it is indeed a good simulation: the crash you see on the street is probably actually happening in the physical world.

Living in a world simulator, then, means that what we think are direct perceptions of the physical world are semi-arbitrary constructions of our computer-like brains, not the things themselves. Our apparently direct experience of the world is actually indirect.

If this were all that living in a world simulator meant, it would not be a great problem. Perceptions could be taken for granted in everyday life: whatever the real physical nature of fire, whether it makes me itch, shiver, or feel cold or tense or relaxed or elated, I nevertheless have learned that fire can burn and so I will treat it carefully. If I am curious about the nature of the outside world in and of itself, I can employ scientific instruments and procedures to learn about properties that are not adequately represented in my (arbitrarily constructed) sensory perceptions. Unfortunately, living in the world simulator has much more important meanings.

Emotional and Psychological Construction of Perception

If perception involves a complex, active construction of a simulation of reality, why aren't we aware of the construction process? Or of the effort involved in constructing it? When I turn my head right now, I instantly see a bookcase. There is no moment of ambiguous shapes and colors, no effortful feeling of comparing these with past knowledge and deciding that a bookcase is the best construct I can make of these particular shapes and colors. My experience is that I instantly see a bookcase.

The difficulty in realizing that perception is an active construction is that its work readily becomes automated, and then we don't sense
the effort. Nor does it take any appreciable psychological time. Early in our lives, as infants, we had to work at constructing perceptions, but that was long ago and is now forgotten.

We occasionally have experiences of ambiguous perceptions today: What is that shape in the dark? Could it be a bush? A crouching person? An animal? Ah, it's a parked motorcycle, viewed end on! Now that you see it as a motorcycle, it is difficult to see it again as a bush or animal or crouching person. Such experiences should alert us to the constructed nature of perception, but they are so rare compared to the instant recognition of things in our automated perception that they have little impact.

The Right Side Up Upside Down World

A striking example of the construction and automation of perception comes from a classical psychological experiment initiated by George Stratton in 1897. A pair of special goggles is put on a subject. Prisms in these goggles invert the visual field both vertically and horizontally so that what was up is now down. The floor is above the subject, the ceiling below. What was on the subject's left is now on his right, and vice versa.

To describe the subject's reaction as confusion is to put it mildly! Moving about is especially difficult, and some subjects feel nauseated. Their lifetime store of visual and motoric simulations of the world and their relation to it are now wrong in major ways.

The inverting goggles are worn for days or weeks. Initially the subject must make perception and movement a conscious act instead of letting them run on automatic. His automatized reactions do not work. If he sees an object that he wants and it is obviously to his left, he must move in the direction his body thinks is right, for example.

After a few days, though, an amazing thing happens. Things no longer look upside down! The subject can reach directly for things without any calculations of where right and left really are. An entirely new set of perceptual simulations has been constructed and automated. He feels as if he perceives reality directly, as it is, the same feeling he had before donning the inverting goggles.

When the goggles are finally removed the world is suddenly upside down and reversed! Conscious compensation for left and right is again required. After some visual experience, though, the old, "normal" pattern is reestablished. Because the old simulation pattern is so thoroughly learned, its reestablishment takes much less time than it took to establish new simulation patterns when the goggles were first put on. The old simulation pattern is just as arbitrary as the new one, of course.

Perceptual Defense

The reality of unconscious processes, mental or emotional, that affect us and yet lie outside conscious awareness is widely accepted in modern psychology. A specific form of unconscious processes, known as perceptual defense, has not been generally accepted, however, in spite of good experimental evidence for it. The haggling over the reality of perceptual defense has been so intense that I have suspected the idea is being actively resisted. It is too clear a reminder of how mechanical we are.

Perceptual defenses are a form of defense mechanism that works to keep us unaware of events in the outside world that would arouse unpleasant or unacceptable emotions in us. The effect was first noticed experimentally in some studies of perceptual thresholds. If a word is flashed very briefly on a screen, what is the minimal time exposure, the perceptual threshold, for conscious recognition of it?

If the flash is extremely brief, say a hundredth of a second or less, you will see only a flash of light, without even perceiving the overall patterning of the letters, much less recognizing them. If it is long, say one-quarter of a second or more, you will readily perceive the word. If you start with flashes too short for recognition and slowly increase the duration of the flashes until correct recognition occurs, the length of flash required is the threshold value.

Factors like the length and familiarity of a word will affect the threshold of recognition. Long, unfamiliar words will have higher thresholds than short, familiar ones. What researchers also noticed was that emotionally charged words, especially those that might create personal conflict in their subjects, had higher thresholds than words of similar length and familiarity that had no threatening emotional connotations. Working with college student subjects of three generations ago, who
would usually not have had a secure sexual identity in those more sexually repressed times, fuck, for example, would generally have a higher threshold than a word like flex.

Psychologists concluded that there are three stages in perception. There is first an initial perception-recognition outside of consciousness. This is followed by a stage involving discrimination of the potential emotional threat of the stimulus. If the stimulus is classified as threatening at this second stage, an influence is exerted on the mind to raise its threshold for the third step of the process, conscious perception of the stimulus.

In terms of our world simulator model, perceptual defense is an understandable phenomenon. A particular stimulus pattern, already modified to some extent by the physical structure of the senses, reaches the computer-brain. There, learned computational processes automatically go to work to construct a simulation of this aspect of reality. As part of creating an appropriate construct-perception-simulation, memory data about this kind of particular stimulus are drawn on.

In the case of perceptual defense, the memory data include information that this is also emotionally threatening. This calls up more memory data about how these kinds of emotional threats should be handled. If the defense style is to try to avoid noticing such threats, then the simulation of this stimulus is constructed in such a way as to be less noticeable to consciousness. And/or the simulation is altered - we could say "distorted" in terms of resemblance to the initiating stimulus - so that the final simulation, what consciousness will perceive, represents something else. This "something else" resembles the original stimulus but is not identical to it. So fuck may become just a flash of light with indistinguishable features, or the simulation-perception may become flux or duck or tuck. As long as the stimulus is not too intense, not well above threshold, the automated simulation process can carry out this sort of altered, distorted construction.

What threatening aspects of reality does your world simulation process create high perceptual thresholds for? How would you discover them?

All this discussion of simulation may create a feeling that there is something unreal about a simulation. Yes, there is in one sense. In terms of what is perceived, though, the simulation in your mind is reality. The person you clearly see crouching in the shadows is a perfectly real perception, is your reality at the time you perceive it, even if you later realize that it was a misperception, a poor simulation of a bush in the dark. The flight simulator you are training in becomes reality for a time. In this model, the reality we live in is the simulation.

We can now see an important aspect of Gurdjieff's statement that man is not awake. In an ordinary nighttime dream we see a whole world of things that are not present in physical reality, but we mistake the dream for reality while it is happening. By contrast (we think), in our waking state we perceive reality. But what we perceive is a simulation of reality. If the simulation is seriously distorted, yet we mistake it for reality, we can be accurately described as being in a kind of waking dream, not really awake. In the next article we shall examine some of the major rules programmed into Westerners that control how reality is to be simulated.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Once you begin to understand that our consciousness "lives in" a simulation of reality, as discussed in the previous article, important questions come to mind. How accurate is my simulation of the actual external world? How can I check its accuracy? What is my simulation-construction of inner representations, like values and meanings? Do I like my habitual simulation? What are its effects on me? How can I come into more direct contact with outer reality? With inner realities?

Modern psychology describes inaccurate simulations of the external world as pathologies of perception and cognition. When your simulation is sufficiently distorted compared to those of "normal" people we describe you as neurotic. A social situation that is simulated by most people as a "fun party," for example, is simulated by you as an anxiety provoking test of your popularity. If the reality you simulate is grossly different from that of normal people, such as hearing voices, you are called crazy or psychotic. Whether you are crazy or not is another question.

"Normal" simulation of reality then becomes a matter of what the majority of people in your culture do.

Many spiritual traditions have a deeper concern about the way we simulate the world than whether it is "normal," however. They believe that even the normal simulation of reality is badly flawed. The similar Hindu and Buddhist concepts of maya or samsara illustrate this.

The idea of samsara is that we live in a world of unreality, of illusion. It is not the world or even ourselves that is illusory, though, but our ideas about reality and ourselves that create illusion. The simulation our consciousness lives in, that we identify with as a direct perception of reality, is very inaccurate. It's good enough in many ways: we can cross the street without being run down by cars (generally), behave in an appropriate manner to buy food in a supermarket, etc. But when it comes to questions about the meaning of our existence and the way we should live our lives and relate to others, the "normal" simulation of reality is often badly distorted. By living in illusion, by acting on the basis of a world view that is badly distorted, we inevitably make mistakes that then create unfortunate consequences. Clearer perception-simulation of our world and ourselves would allow us to avoid much suffering.

Two major ways of overcoming the limitations of the world simulator, of getting in better touch with reality exist. One way involves attention training processes, like insight meditation (see Shinzen Young's article on meditation in the last issue of The Open Mind), that promote a volitional type of more direct access to perceptual input, before the automated world simulation process can work it over and distort it so much. The second way involves getting insights into the particular contents of your world simulation process, bringing to consciousness the specifics of how you construct your experienced world. Such insights remove energy from these automated simulation processes so you have a choice to allow them to operate or not another. We will focus on an important aspect of the second way in this article.

Implicit Reinforcement of the Rules

While many of the criteria for constructing our world are indoctrinated in us in our early years, and become automated, these criteria also generally work more effectively if they are occasionally reinforced. Much "normal" social interaction does this. When you meet someone and say "Hi! How are you?", on one level you are greeting him and enquiring about his health. On another level you are reminding him of cultural rules for greeting and he responds in a way that acknowledges these rules and shows that he understands them and belongs to the class of normal people. These reminders about and reinforcements of normal behavior further reinforce our internal simulations of the world and ourselves in normal ways: the more your habitual construction of the world and yourself fits the external rules, the more "natural" and easy your behavior, your fitting in. This kind of automatized behavior seems easy, although, as discussed in my Waking Up book, it is eventually quite costly.
An enormous amount of reminding and reinforcing of cultural rules for simulating reality goes on in everyday behavior. The reinforcing of the rules is all the more effective for our unconsciousness of what we are doing.

Explicit Reinforcement of the Rules

Sometimes we are quite explicit about reinforcing the cultural rules as to how you construct-simulate your world. Consider the Apostle's Creed, recited, in only slightly varying forms, by millions of Christians every Sunday:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary; Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into Hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From there he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost; The Holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints; The forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body; and the Life Everlasting. Amen.

Here we have a completely explicit statement of some of the central criteria for simulating your world; other criteria, not explicitly stated but associated with these, are brought to mind by reciting the creed.

The recitation of the Apostle's Creed is a social ritual. You do it in church, witnessed by fellow believers. Our natural social instinct, the desire to belong, is harnessed to reinforce the Creed.

Contemporary secular Western culture has beliefs about our and the world's nature, and the purpose of life. These beliefs control the way our brains simulate our reality. We generally do not express them so explicitly as the Apostle's Creed expresses core Christian beliefs. Lack of explicitness is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, our beliefs do not get as much reinforcement as the beliefs of an explicit creed. On the other, by not being explicitly made conscious they are subject to less potential examination and so can affect us more unconsciously.

The Scientific Creation Myth

What does modern science seem to say about the nature of reality? Consider this simplified sketch of what is supposedly scientific fact about ourselves and our world.

In the beginning, a long time ago, all the matter in the universe got together in a single massive point. There was no external "reason" for it to be there, mechanical gravitational attraction just got it all together. As a result of the unimaginable pressures, temperatures, and nuclear reactions that developed in this ultra-dense matter, the Big Bang occurred, an explosion of matter and energy outward. This explosion created the physical world we know today.

In its outward rush physical forces resulted in some matter clumping together and creating stars and planets. On Earth the ceaseless, mindless interaction of matter with matter went on for billions of years, driven by its own material properties, fueled by energy from the sun and the Earth's own internal heat. Elements reacted with each other to form simple chemicals, and simple chemicals reacted with each other to form more complex chemical compounds.

In this immense span of time some complex chemical compounds were randomly created which had an interesting property. They absorbed other chemicals from their environment and turned them into themselves, so they preserved and enlarged themselves for a time against the changes in their environments.

Of these complex compounds, at least one developed an even more interesting property: it reproduced copies of itself that preserved its two inherent properties. That is, the new copies also absorbed other chemical compounds from their environment and turned them into themselves, so they preserved and enlarged themselves for a time against the changes in their environments.

Of these complex compounds, at least one developed an even more interesting property: it reproduced copies of itself that preserved its two inherent properties. That is, the new copies also absorbed other chemical compounds from their environment to preserve and enlarge themselves, and they in turn produced copies of themselves with these properties. We call this the emergence of life.

As billions of years continued to go by, the chemical compounds we call living continued to interact with their environment. There was no choice, of course, for the laws of physics required such interaction. Living organisms either died out when conditions were unfavorable or got more complex. We call the process of being pushed by physical laws into more complex forms evolution.

One of these complex organic forms became
us. Because our ancestors had developed an elaborate network of specialized chemical compounds, the nervous system and brain, in the course of adapting to the environment, we developed intelligence. Intelligence is, among other things, the ability to simulate the external environment inside the nervous system, to estimate "What would happen if...?" without actually doing something externally. Partial awareness of this simulation process is what we call consciousness. The question "What would happen if I poked at this sleeping bear with a stick?" could be answered by internal images drawn from memories of what happened when other, smaller animals were annoyed, so you went away from the sleeping bear without actually poking it!

The nervous system and brain, those specialized chemical bodies, went on to develop elaborate simulations, sometimes so elaborate that they simulate things that don't exist. That is, we get imaginary, subjective ideas about things, such as an invisible black sky dragon temporarily eating the moon as an explanation of lunar eclipses. Or ideas, even simulations that seem to be actual experiences, of supernatural beings like God.

As long as basic physical survival needs are attended to, which is likely if the simulation of the physical world is good, the physically intact unit, the person, survives and can continue the subjective luxury of ideas about imaginary things like altruism, social systems, enlightenment, salvation, etc. Social groups may form around some of these ideas which then further reinforce the ideas in their members, even if they have no basis in physical reality. If these subjective simulations get strong enough to disrupt the basic simulation of the real physical world, troubles results, which can lead to the destruction of the organism.

When the organism dies the physical-electrical-chemical integrity of the brain and nervous system is broken and so consciousness, a subjective reflection of brain functioning, disappears.

This is the creation myth of contemporary scientism, science ossifying and acting as a belief system instead of as a continual challenge to further thought. These ideas have a fair amount of utility in making sense of our experience of the physical world. They also function as a creation myth and as a set of values by telling us the way things are.

Unfortunately, this set of ideas is not explicitly presented as a myth or as a set of values, but simply as the closest thing we have to actual truth. By thinking of them as factual, we overlook the way in which they function as a myth about why we are here and what we are here for. After all, you wouldn't want to have values that contradicted "reality." Living in our contemporary world constantly exposes us to this myth, and we are socially reinforced for accepting it. Isn't it generally preferable to hear "She has a sound, scientific mind." as opposed to something like "She falls for every flaky fad that comes along."

All things I think I see reflect ideas

This is salvation's keynote: What I see reflects a process in my mind, which starts with my idea of what I want. From there, the mind makes up an image of the thing the mind desires, judges valuable, and therefore seeks to find. These images are then projected outward, looked upon, esteemed as real, and guarded as one's own. From insane wishes comes an insane world. From judgement comes a world condemned. And from forgiving thoughts a gentle world comes forth, with mercy for the holy Son of God....

From the Workbook for Students of A Course in Miracles, Lesson 325. Reprinted by permission of The Foundation for Inner Peace, Tiburon, CA 94920.
To illustrate the effects of the way we simulate our world and ourselves along the lines of scientism, let us consider a training exercise I developed several years ago.

Belief Experiments

The Western Creed exercise is a form of belief experiment. I ask people if they are willing to participate in a belief experiment. For 10 or 20 minutes they are to give the material I will soon present as much unconditional belief and energy as possible, while a detached part of their mind observes what their reactions are.

I have taken the apparent scientific "facts" about the nature of reality narrated above and put them and some of their implications into a form that parallels the Apostle's Creed. Ideally I use it in workshops, where there is time for me to discuss individual's reactions with them. Here you will get it on your own, but I suggest that you try it with a group of friends.

I do warn people that the belief experiment may not be pleasant, but almost everyone who does it feels wiser as a result.

I pass out copies of the Western Creed and then have people stand up, at attention, in neat rows, with their right hands over their hearts. This deliberately invokes a situation every American has been in, pledging allegiance to the flag. This is done to illustrate the importance of shared social activity in influencing our beliefs.

Then we read the Western Creed aloud in unison. Following that, I ask people to sit down quietly and reflect on their experience, particularly the emotional reactions aroused by the creed: abstract intellectual analysis at this point will distract from what you can learn. After a few minutes we share reactions.

The Western Creed is printed on the next page. If you want an interesting learning experience, try a modified version of the above procedure. Get permission from yourself to temporarily believe it (preferably before reading it), then stand with your hand on your heart and recite it aloud. Then sit down and reflect on your experience.

Remember, after a few minutes you can stop believing it. Of course you might find that you believe parts of it anyway....

Please examine your own emotional reactions after reading the Creed. Taking notes might be helpful. Once you are clear about your emotional reactions you can intellectually analyze your thoughts and feelings about whatever the Creed has brought up in you.

When you are ready to think about it more, ask yourself some questions. What parts seem like obviously true descriptions of reality? How do you personally know they are true? Have you tested them for yourself, as scientists are supposed to do, or just accepted them on authority? Do you have any fears of looking at some of these ideas too deeply? If so, why? Who would you be displeasing? How many of these beliefs were consciously chosen by you?

I will deliberately end this article without any intellectual resolution of the issues raised. You need to resolve them in your personal life, and we westerners need to resolve them as a culture.

My best wishes for greater wisdom, even at the price of some temporary sadness.
PILGRIMAGE: PSYCHOTHERAPY AND PERSONAL EXPLORATION

At its theoretical best, psychotherapy should aim to bring out all the human potentials that are our heritage, not simply to cure "problems." At its least, psychotherapy simply adjusts a client to the normative behavior patterns, feelings and perceptions of his or her culture, regardless of whether the culture is itself healthy or sick. To work toward its highest possibilities, psychotherapy needs a frame of reference that is bigger than its culture's.

Those of you who are in the helping professions and who want to connect your work more thoroughly with the spiritual, transpersonal side of man will want mine a relatively new journal, Pilgrimage: Psychotherapy and Personal Exploration.

Edited by psychologist David Barstow, Pilgrimage presents both clinical cases and theoretical and integrative articles from this wider perspective. A sampling of titles in recent issues includes "Privacy for the Love of It," "Gestalt Family Therapy and the Human Condition," "Awe in the Presence of Another and the Concept of Projection," "The Psychotherapist as Midwife," and "There's More Than One Way to Die." Articles are generally quite stimulating. You don't have to work professionally as a helper to find useful ideas for your growth in this journal.

Pilgrimage is published six times per year at a subscription price of $24. Information and subscriptions may be obtained from Pilgrimage Press Inc., 427 Lakeshore Drive NE, Atlanta, GA 30307.

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THE WESTERN CREED

I BELIEVE in the material universe as the only and ultimate reality, a universe controlled by fixed physical laws and blind chance.

I AFFIRM that the universe has no creator, no objective purpose, and no objective meaning or destiny.

I MAINTAIN that all ideas about God or gods, enlightened beings, prophets and saviors, or other non-physical beings or forces are superstitions and delusions. Life and consciousness are totally identical to physical processes, and arose from chance interactions of blind physical forces. Like the rest of life, my life and my consciousness have no objective purpose, meaning, or destiny.

I BELIEVE that all judgements, values, and moralities, whether my own or others, are subjective, arising solely from biological determinants, personal history, and chance. Free will is an illusion. Therefore the most rational values I can personally live by must be based on the knowledge that for me what pleases me is Good, what pains me is Bad. Those who please me or help me avoid pain are my friends; those who pain me or keep me from my pleasure are my enemies. Rationality requires that friends and enemies be used in ways that maximize my pleasure and minimize my pain.

I AFFIRM that churches have no real use other than social support; that there are no objective sins to commit or be forgiven for; that there is no retribution for sin or reward for virtue other than that which I can arrange, directly or through others. Virtue for me is getting what I want without being caught and punished by others.

I MAINTAIN that the death of the body is the death of the mind. There is no afterlife, and all hope of such is nonsense.

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I MAINTAIN that all ideas about God or gods, enlightened beings, prophets and saviors, or other non-physical beings or forces are superstitions and delusions. Life and consciousness are totally identical to physical processes, and arose from chance interactions of blind physical forces. Like the rest of life, my life and my consciousness have no objective purpose, meaning, or destiny.

I BELIEVE that all judgements, values, and moralities, whether my own or others, are subjective, arising solely from biological determinants, personal history, and chance. Free will is an illusion. Therefore the most rational values I can personally live by must be based on the knowledge that for me what pleases me is Good, what pains me is Bad. Those who please me or help me avoid pain are my friends; those who pain me or keep me from my pleasure are my enemies. Rationality requires that friends and enemies be used in ways that maximize my pleasure and minimize my pain.

I AFFIRM that churches have no real use other than social support; that there are no objective sins to commit or be forgiven for; that there is no retribution for sin or reward for virtue other than that which I can arrange, directly or through others. Virtue for me is getting what I want without being caught and punished by others.

I MAINTAIN that the death of the body is the death of the mind. There is no afterlife, and all hope of such is nonsense.
BOOKS IN BRIEF

Foundations of Parapsychology: Exploring the Boundaries of Human Capability, by H. Edge, R. Morris, J. Palmer, & J. Rush. New York: Metheun, 1986, $49.95 cloth, $22.50 paper, 432 pp., index. Intended as a college level text to review and integrate the large literature of scientific parapsychology, this is must reading for anyone seriously interested in the field. The authors are all experienced researchers in parapsychology and so have a real feel for both the advances and the difficulties in making sense of this area. Their backgrounds include psychology, philosophy, and physics.

The writing style is generally quite clear, even though some material is technical. Topics covered include spontaneous psi experiences, methods of faking apparent psi, basic experimental methods in the field, a balanced coverage of some of the controversies generated, surveys of findings on ESP and psychokinesis (PK), physical and quasi-physical theories of psi, the question of survival of death, and various implications of psi phenomena.

Awakenings, by Oliver Sacks. New York: Dutton, 1983, $8.95, paper, 338 pp., index. My parapsychological research has convinced me that mind is something fundamentally different than our physical selves. Yet our body, brain, and nervous system are an incredible marvel, and that is where consciousness resides almost all of our lives. This book is a fascinating reminder of the marvels of body, brain and nervous system.

"In the winter of 1916-17, in Vienna and other cities, a 'new' illness suddenly appeared - - - - - Its manifestations were so varied that no two patients ever presented exactly the same picture - - - - . Encephalitis lethargica - - - - - was a Hydra with a thousand heads - - - - . In the ten years that it raged, this pandemic took or ravaged the lives of nearly five million people before it disappeared as mysteriously and suddenly as it had arrived in 1927 - - - - - . Patients who suffered but survived an extremely severe somnolent/insomnia attack of this kind often failed to recover their original aliveness. They would be conscious and aware - yet not fully awake; they would sit motionless and speechless all day in their chairs - - - - - they were as insubstantial as ghosts and as passive as zombies - - - - . They were ontologically dead, or suspended, or 'asleep' - awaiting an awakening which came (for the tiny fraction who survived) fifty years later."

This book is the story of their awakenings with a newly developed drug. Need I go on to indicate how fascinating this story is?

Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics: Lifestyles for Self-Discovery. By Marsha Sinetar. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1986, paper, 192pp., $7.95, no index. We tend to think of monks (male or female) and mystics as special people, very different from us, living a quite exotic life style. Actually ordinary people do become self-actualized, to use Maslow's excellent term; they seek and find more authentic ways of living and being. In this fascinating survey Sinetar acquaints us with people who realized they had to live partially or wholly apart from the ordinary social world as part of their search, and reports on psychological and practical aspects of this disentanglement. As they succeed in finding the deeper and more authentic aspects of their Selves, however, they also become more a a Good Steward, wanting to contribute to the quality of life for all. Finding ways of right livelihood is also part of the story.

Double Vision. By Judith Skutch and Tamara Cohen. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1985, $9.95, softcover, 269 pp., no index. At the surface level this is a fascinating human interest story about the relationship between Judith Skutch and her daughter Tamara Cohen. What makes it particularly interesting is that Judith Skutch was the "den mother" to many parapsychologists during the exciting expansion of that field in the 1970s, and Tamara saw these same people with the "innocence" of childhood. Even more importantly, the book details the evolution of a "technical" interest in the paranormal to an active spiritual life as the Skutch's foundation, originally set up to aid laboratory parapsychological research, became the publisher of A Course in Miracles. Since much of our interest in ESP and similar phenomena is the more acceptable side (in a scientific culture) of our deeper interests in the nature of the Spirit, this story is inspiring for all of us.
LECTURES AND WORKSHOPS

by Charles T. Tart


November 13, 1986: Truth and Illusion on the Spiritual Path. Berkeley, California, Melia Foundation, 1525 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley 94709, 845-6966, 8PM.


June 20-July 1, 1987: Workshop on Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential. Ten day Hawaii cruise, sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences, 475 Gate Five Road, Sausalito, California 94965, 415-331-5650.

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