

# The Facts May Not Be True

## Part I

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Charles T. Tart, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at the University of California at Davis, is well-known for editing *Altered States of Consciousness*. The author of numerous contributions to scholarly journals, he was born in Pennsylvania, studied electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, then continued his studies of psychology at the University of North Carolina, where he received his Ph.D. in 1963.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE, through self-observation and psychological growth techniques, has been of finding many areas in which my actions and thoughts were controlled by lifelong assumptions which had been completely unconscious. There is an immense amount of evidence from psychological experimentation in general to support this position. Innumerable examples through all areas of psychology can be found by looking at any elementary psychology textbook. One of the earliest studies, for example, showed that poor children tend to perceive coins as being larger than rich children do, a case in which perception was altered by value judgments that constitute sets of assumptions. Psychoanalysis provides numerous examples from individual therapy in which people's reactions to others are based on distorted per-

All of us make certain assumptions about reality before we can even begin to reason. Thereafter, we seldom question the validity of these assumptions, and so they finally have great power over us. They are presumed to be "the facts." But Charles T. Tart, Ph.D., in a chapter from the book, *TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGIES*, of which he is editor, calls numerous of these "facts" into question. This article, excerpted from that chapter, examines many of these assumptions in light of the assertions of the "spiritual psychologies."

ceptions stemming from transference reactions to parents. Innumerable examples from social psychology show that people's perceptions of and reactions toward others are often based on stereotypes and prejudices, inculcated in childhood, which have sunk below the level of consciousness.

The thing that constantly amazes me, however, is that while psychologists are quite familiar with innumerable pieces of evidence supporting this picture of human beings as constantly controlled by implicit assumptions, they practically never apply it to their personal lives or to their scientific work, or they apply it in one all area of their life or work and implicitly assume that they personally are not controlled by large numbers of implicit assumptions in all the rest of their

areas of life and work. Yet if one begins to apply this idea to psychological research, it is clear that much of what we consider our "data" may be only relatively true; it is data only in the sense that it applies within the context of certain generally shared cultural assumptions, certain generally shared assumptions in the psychological domain, and the particular personal involvement and motivation of the subjects and the experimenters involved.

I came into psychology with an odd background, a long-term interest in altered states of consciousness and extrasensory perception. I had to suppress the expression of much of this interest during my undergraduate and graduate training because it was clearly at variance with what many of my professors "knew" to be true; that is, it conflicted with a variety of widely accepted assumptions in the psychological community. This made me

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aware of how many things which were "self-evidently true" to my colleagues were not "self-evidently true" to many other people outside of orthodox, Western psychology, and so sensitized me to question some of the assumptions that we make.

... as long as an assumption is *implicit*, as long as it is operating outside of conscious awareness, you are unlikely to ever question it, and so you are totally in the power of that assumption. Given that human behavior is incredibly complex, and that within a given cultural context shared implicit assumptions will make for commonalities of behavior and so seem to "validate" these assumptions, I believe that our orthodox, Western psychology, the psychology taught in universities, is full of a very large number of *relative* truths, *relative* facts. I have sufficient faith in the scientific method to believe that in the long run the consequences of the assumptions producing this relativity will start coming out in experimental data and force us to confront these assumptions and modify them. Unfortunately, the "long run" may take thousands of years, given our attachment to our assumptions and our ability to falsely vali-

date them among people who share the same assumptions.

What I wish to do . . . is to state *explicitly* a large number of the implicit assumptions that are part of orthodox, Western psychology (and of Western, educated people in general). This will serve a purpose of making clearer the background many of us have and from which we look at the spiritual psychologies [those dealing with ultimate purposes, higher entities, God, love, compassion, and purpose], but my real hope for trying to bring these assumptions into consciousness is to make it possible for us to ask questions about them.

I am going to present these assumptions in the form of articles of faith, blunt statements that such and such is true, and then make some comments on differing ways of looking at these "obvious truths" from the viewpoint of the spiritual psychologies.\* I believe one of the commonest assumptions of many readers will be on the order of: "That's not an assumption, that's a *fact!*" I then invite the interested reader to take a further step, however,

\*It is arrogant for me to state what the spiritual psychologies generally assume about certain things, given my limited knowledge of them, but I hope the potential usefulness of this [information] in getting readers to question their assumptions will outweigh my errors in speaking for the spiritual psychologies.

and ask himself some questions. How do I *personally* know that this statement is true? Have I validated it for myself, or did I simply passively accept it because it was taught to me by someone I regarded as an authority and/or because it was generally accepted by my peers? How strongly do I react emotionally to the idea of questioning this statement? Do I have an emotional investment in this statement's being true? Am I really willing to look to see if I have an emotional investment in this statement's being true? Am I just intellectually saying, "Okay, this is an assumption," as a quick means of dismissing it from my mind so I do not have to actually think about whether this might be only an assumption, and not true?

*Assumption: The universe was created accidentally or created itself or has always been around, and there is no purpose or reason for the universe existing.*

Members of Western scientific culture in general, as well as psychologists specifically, basically assume that the universe in which they live has no reason for its existence. Because this is a somewhat depressing idea, we seldom give

any thought to it. This assumption and other assumptions about the nature of the universe as a whole are incredibly audacious assumptions when one realizes they are made by a creature which lives on one little planet in a rather remote portion of one galaxy and has possessed the rudiments of science for only a couple of centuries.

The spiritual psychologies generally assume a purpose for the universe, covering such alternatives as its having been created by some kind of a god, to the universe itself being some kind of living entity or being which is expressing itself, or the universe as a whole having a purpose and that it is evolving toward a higher level of consciousness and action. These are not mutually exclusive ideas.

*Assumption: The universe is dead; life is only an infinitesimal, insignificant part of the universe.*

In terms of sheer bulk, life as we know it does indeed take up only a small portion of our world, and it is assumed that this is true all through the universe. Further, life is seen as an accidental development of lifeless physical forces and as having no real function in the universe. Given the universe as

basically purposeless, what function could life have? This assumption fits well with the stance of so much of our Western culture of man standing alone, surrounded by vast, merciless, inanimate forces.

Many of the spiritual psychologies assume the universe is either mostly alive or completely alive. For example, the Gurdjieff system assumes that the planets are alive and evolving, but their life takes place on such a vast time scale compared to ours that it is impossible for us to notice this in an ordinary way. Most of the spiritual psychologies not only assume purpose for the universe but, seeing it as alive and evolving, give the universe the same properties as life in general. A consequence of this is that man's relationship to a living, interconnected, and evolving universe is quite different than if he assumes the universe is dead and purposeless.

*Assumption: What is real is what can be perceived by the senses or by a physical instrument, and what can be perceived by the senses can be detected by a physical instrument.*

This is an alternative way of looking at some [other] assumptions . . . , but one which

seems to operate almost independently of the others and so deserves to be expressed separately. It comes out in this attitude: If you make a claim, show me your proof with my physical senses or my instruments. If, for example, someone claims to see rays of light radiating from a saint, we say show it to me with my eyes, and if I can't see it with my eyes then put a physical instrument there, and if that doesn't detect it, it is not real.

The spiritual psychologies assume the reality of things which are not real in the physical sense. For our example of seeing rays of light streaming from around a saint, a phenomenon often called the aura, the answer from the spiritual psychologies' point of view might be that indeed this was an illusion at some times on the part of the perceiver, but at other times it is a perfectly real perception through faculties that are different from the ordinary senses, which do not rely on the energies of the physical universe as we know it. So nonphysical things can be just as real as physical things. Such nonphysical realities may or may not show interaction with the physical world, but their realities are not to be judged by

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whether or not they have a physical manifestation.

*Assumption: Man is his body and nothing more.*

Put more fully, we assume that a man is his skeleton, muscles, tendons, blood supply, internal organs, sense receptors, and nervous system: that the concept of man is essentially totally defined by the physical parts which constitute him. If we had a different array of physical equipment — say, a different nervous system and different senses — we would not be man as we know him. So, to ultimately understand man, one must understand the physical, physiological systems that comprise him. Given our culture's hyperintellectuality, this particularly means that we must understand the functioning of the brain and nervous system.

The spiritual psychologies do not accept this assumption but always consider that man is something else in addition to a physical body, or at least potentially something else. Thus we have the concept of a soul — some nonphysical portion, very much the essence of man, which may be able to exist independently of physically embodied man. Or we have the idea that man is essen-

tially a mental being, and while he may or may not possess an individual soul, he is capable of contacting and merging with nonphysical things outside his physical body. Or the idea that man may come, through proper psychological work, to develop something other than the purely physical in himself, which then becomes very much a part of his reality. The various spiritual psychologies may see the body as relatively unimportant or as a very important shaper of experience, but only one *component* of the total nature of man.

*Assumption: Man starts life "fresh," except for limitations set on him by his genetic inheritance, his cultural environment, and accidental happenings, all modified by his reactions to them.*

This says that a human being's life starts essentially at birth, is determined almost totally by physical factors (the influence of culture and other people as mediated by physical factors), and ends in death. It is a very clear span, with the hope of understanding all the factors that influence it in between.

Spiritual psychologies often take the view that man does not start fresh this way: they may believe in previous lives, that a

man starts life with an inheritance, both favorable and unfavorable, from his experiences in previous lives. They may see human life as extending on in some form after death. Thus an individual may come into life with a mission or purpose. Trying to understand a man's life in terms of just the physical span of it can be seen as very incomplete, even though not insignificant.

*Assumption: We have a rather good understanding of the history of man.*

Our libraries are filled with history books, and archaeological evidence fills in the general picture for periods of man's history before the widespread deployment of written records. So if you want to get a general picture of history, you can go to the library and read about it. Many theories about the psychology of man, such as his innate degree of aggressiveness, are based on this generally accepted history.

Many of the spiritual psychologies have quite different views of the history of man, sometimes referring to civilizations of which we have no scientific record. They often depend more on oral traditions than written records. It is interesting to note our tremen-

dous preference on physical records in writing history: if a single manuscript says that A is true and many oral traditions (among the "peasants") say that B is true, we will often accept A. It is amusing to think that a few liars in previous times who knew how to write could have far more influence on us than people who accurately remembered and passed down what had happened.

We believe, based on our idea of history, that we have been making progress: some of the spiritual psychologies believe we have been going downhill from far more psychologically and spiritually advanced civilizations of the past, although these civilizations may not have produced much in the way of physical artifacts. The assumption that we are making progress is a very important one to us, so we label as crackpots those people who take the idea that earlier civilizations were ahead of us.

*Assumption: We understand the origin and evolution of man.*

The orthodox assumption is that man evolved by a series of accidents from life on this planet, which in turn had evolved from a series of physical accidents or inevitable con-

sequences of the physical environment. Our origin, basically, is that it just happened that way because that's the way it had to happen, given the prevailing conditions. Our evolution has been in the pattern we have deduced, from ape to man.

Some of the spiritual psychologies have a theory of evolution for man which is not a blind evolution but an evolution guided by nonphysical forces, or by a divine creator or creators, or by the inherent aliveness and purposefulness of the universe. Others postulate either a special creation of man or that man is a representation of higher levels of being acting on this earth, rather than a product of the earth itself, even though by being physically embodied he is very much of the earth.

*Assumption: Each man is isolated from all others, locked within his nervous system.*

Given the view that consciousness is the function of the physical operation of the nervous system, and that the physical is what is real, any knowledge of anatomy will show that one nervous system is completely isolated from *direct* contact with another nervous system. The only way we can contact one another is through

the intermediary of making changes in our bodies which affect other physical energies which affect receptors in the other person and are turned into nervous impulses that will affect his or her consciousness, a very tenuous and indirect link, subject to many errors. So each man is an island, and a totally isolated island. The best we can do to find happiness and meaning is to modify our own nervous system functioning (thinking, feeling, imagining) or try to have desirable kinds of sensory stimulation from the world and others reach us, and not have undesirable kinds reach us.

The spiritual psychologies, in not accepting man as strictly physical, also open the possibility of *direct* contact between one human being and another, contact between the spiritual essence of each that is not limited by the physical properties of the nervous system. The contact of love, for example, may be a chemical-neural interaction between two people in many instances, but sometimes it may be far more. Love may be an energy or reality that actually bridges the gap between people, not just an arbitrary way of reprogramming the human biocomputer.

*Assumption: Man has no function in a purposeless universe.*

With all reality being nothing but matter and energy operating in the space-time framework, purpose is an idea that exists only in human brains, this idea itself being only a function of the workings of various physical processes. Man has no purpose at all in terms of the universe. He may invent his own purposes, as will be discussed in some of the assumptions following, but there is no purpose in terms of the real universe.

The spiritual psychologies give man a function in the universe. The nature of the function may vary. It may be to attain salvation for the glory of God; it may be to become more conscious as an integral expression of the evolutionary urge of the universe; it may be to act as a channel for higher evolutionary forces to reach our levels, and so on.

*Assumption: The universe is a harsh, uncaring, unresponsive place.*

This may be partly a modern version of the widespread Christian religious belief that matter is essentially evil and a temptation keeping us from God. If the universe is purposeless,

how can we have any connection with it except to try to avoid the misfortunes that would otherwise occur? And we certainly can't expect the universe to care about us: the best human beings can do is provide for their own preservation and pleasure individually and in groups.

The spiritual psychologies may assume that the universe is harsh, but it is not uncaring. Harshness can be seen as justice and lawfulness. Insofar as we are important parts of an interrelated, evolving universe, we are receiving lessons from being in this universe, if we will pay heed to it. Indeed, the universe may be quite responsive, with our level of spiritual being attracting various events which are appropriate. This is particularly expressed in Gurdjieff's psychology in a way which, if you think about it, can be seen as very wonderful or very frightening. The idea is that your level of spiritual being attracts your life, that the universe is very responsive to "prayer," in the sense that what you want sets up nonphysical forces that tend to bring things about physically. The problem is, in Gurdjieff's view, that we are so psychologically messed up, and have so many contradic-

tory and self-destructive wishes, that getting what we "want" may be very unpleasant.

*Assumption: We are here to conquer the universe.*

This seems to follow from the previous assumptions about the nature of the universe and man's place and function in it. If we want to ensure our survival, maximize our pleasure, and minimize our pain, we must take a harsh, uncaring universe and shape it to our needs as we see them. This assumption is so widespread that I think it will be very hard to see how much it affects our behavior. After all, didn't our country become great by *conquering* the harsh, primeval wilderness and the savages who dwelt in it? Isn't the next great human adventure the *conquest* of space?

The spiritual psychologies would generally feel that we are here to understand our place in the universe and to harmoniously fulfill our function in it once we understand it, not to try to shape the universe to fit with our limited view of what is good for us.

*(to be concluded)*

