

The Facts May Not Be True

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Part II

[*Editor's note:* In Part I of this article, Dr. Tart established the format for his examination of many assumptions of orthodox, Western psychology. After naming a particular assumption (one which, in the West, is usually regarded as being self-evident truth), he elaborates on its background then considers the same concept as it is viewed by the "spiritual psychologies." The following list of assumptions concludes an excerpt from Dr. Tart's extensive selection.]

Assumption: Lower organisms exist for man's benefit.

Since we are the smartest creatures around in a purposeless universe, the only limits on exploiting other organisms for our benefit are economic and ecological reasons — that is,

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Our implicit assumptions about the nature of reality, whether they are true or not, have great power over us if we are not aware that we're making them. In the conclusion of this article, excerpted from the book *Transpersonal Psychologies*, of which he is editor, Charles Tart makes explicit many such assumptions of the Western mind, comparing them to the assertions of the "spiritual psychologies."

we don't want to overexploit and disrupt the ecosystem and consequently suffer for it later. But there is no inherent reason for not exploiting other creatures. Practically, our cultural conditioning makes many of us squeamish about *personally* killing or inflicting pain on animals, but there is no inherent reason for not exploiting all other life forms in the most effective way possible.

The spiritual psychologies see man as having obligations toward lower life forms, as well as obligations toward higher life forms. Man, as part of an overall, evolving, *interrelated* universe, needs to discover and fulfill his function in it, not define it in any arbitrary way he wants, such as maximizing his own benefit.



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Assumption: Consciousness is produced by the activity of the brain, and therefore the activity of consciousness is identical with the activity of the brain.

This is more formally called the psychoneural identity thesis. Since reality is ultimately physical in nature, consciousness itself must be a product of that physical activity. All the intricacies and subtleties of consciousness therefore represent intricate patterns of neural firing within the brain and, to some extent, within the nervous system generally. This supports the orthodox, Western psychological assumption that each of us is completely alone: since consciousness is a function of nervous system activity and

nervous systems are not connected, we are doomed to be forever alone (until some supersurgeon of the future starts connecting nervous systems together).

The spiritual psychologies generally treat the brain and nervous system as an *instrument* of consciousness, but classify consciousness as a factor every bit as real in its own right as physical things. William James argued a good many years ago that there was no logical way of distinguishing by observation whether consciousness was generated by the brain or was a transmitter of it. The important consequence of not identifying consciousness with brain activity, no matter how much consciousness may be affected by working through the brain, is that consciousness may then exist independently of the brain. There is actually excellent scientific evidence for this hypothesis, inferentially through the phenomena of extrasensory perception, and directly in out-of-the-body experiences

Assumption: Death is the inevitable end of human life.

This is not something we like to think of: death is a taboo topic in psychology, often not

even to be found in the indexes of books on psychology, much less given any real treatment. But we all believe that the physical body will eventually malfunction sufficiently so that we will die. Medical science may prolong life, but death is inevitable, despite science fictionish dreams of medically produced immortality.

Some spiritual psychologies, however, believe that while physical death is certainly the common lot, some spiritually developed individuals may be able to alter the life processes in their body to achieve life spans of hundreds of years or even relative immortality. Particularly in some of the alchemical traditions, such as the Chinese alchemical tradition, this has been stated as a goal which has been attained by some of the older adepts. The general principle is that greatly enlarged physical life span or immortality is not attained by medical means, but by understanding, controlling, and balancing the nonphysical energies that constitute the essence of life, but which are ordinarily misused. Note, however, that prolonging physical life is not considered useful unless corresponding spiritual growth takes place, and even then it may not be desirable.

Assumption: A sense of personality, personal identity is vital, and its loss is pathological.

The term "depersonalization" is used to describe psychiatric difficulties, and, in general, any marked fading of the sense of personal identity is considered pathological. A major exception is when a person becomes relatively identified with a "good cause," a cause we approve of, and then we consider it a healthy sign that the person can be so devoted. If a friend says, "I'm not sure who I am — I have questions about my identity," we are liable to refer him to a psychiatrist.

While given cases of changes in personal identity may be pathological, the spiritual psychologies would also see this as a possible sign of real questioning necessary to spiritual growth. As long as one accepts the surface identity, the personality brought about by one's particular upbringing and particular culture, he is not really turning attention to his deeper self. There are meditation techniques which involve repeatedly asking the question: "Who am I?" and questioning each answer more and more deeply. At the higher levels of spiritual experience, personal identity temporarily disappears

altogether as the person becomes aware of and identified with higher spiritual forces or entities. Failure to lose one's sense of personal identity is frequently regarded as failure to achieve success in the spiritual discipline. After profound mystical experiences, involving union with the highest levels of the universe, the personality may reappear in the person's subsequent life, but it is now only a collection of characteristics of no great importance, a *style or tool* of expression rather than the basic nature of the person, who is now in touch with and identified with something much deeper.

Assumption: The basic development of personality is finished and complete in adulthood, except in the cases of neurotics or other mentally ill persons.

While we can see that people may learn specific bits of knowledge and specific skills all through their lives, their basic structure, their basic personality, is considered to be relatively complete by the time of young adulthood. Assuming an average life span of sixty-some years, the first third of life then is devoted to acquiring basic psychological skills and at-

titudes, and the rest of life to living within that framework. We may work on changing and developing the external environment in our maturity, but our own psychological growth is done with, our basic personality is fairly rigid and won't change, except in the case of neurotics who have to make up for improper and missed development from the first third of their life. Another way of saying this is that if we are an adult we then assume we are mature.

The spiritual psychologies all take the view that development is not over on reaching adulthood, that development to be an adequately functioning member of society is only a preliminary groundwork to beginning real spiritual development. Personality should not remain at this relatively shallow and culturally bound level, but the individual should begin to contact deeper and deeper levels of himself in the course of his spiritual growth. Lifelong growth is the goal. The idea that because we are an adult we are mature is laughable. Too, development and growth do not necessarily stop with one lifetime. The potentials of men are so vastly greater than those represented by the ordinary

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adult's adjustment to his culture that the feat of adjusting to one's culture is of no great consequence.

Assumption: Reasoning is the highest skill possessed by man.

The ability to think and to think logically (ignoring, for the sake of this discussion, the fact that there are many logics) is considered the unique ability of man, that which separates him from the animals and gives him dominion over the earth. For our orthodox, Western psychologists, it is the skill which brings the most reward in the profession in general, and this is generally true for scientists and academics as a whole.

The spiritual psychologies would certainly agree that reasoning is a valuable skill, but many would disagree that it is the highest skill. Some would call intuition the greatest skill possessed by man; others would call the ability to love the highest skill. The importance of these differences in assumptions will become clearer as we go on.

Assumption: When people agree with me they are being rational; when they disagree they are probably irrational.

Psychologists have no monopoly on this one: we all do it all the time, and everyone deplores it, but it's a good thing to be reminded of it.

Assumption: Faith means believing in things that are not real or that you have no solid evidence for.

Faith is a negatively loaded word for most Western psychologists, indicating that people believe the most irrational, nonsensical things possible and, perversely, are proud that they believe in such things. Things like the existence of God, for example. When faith is of something you are sure is true and will eventually be provable, even though you do not have enough evidence yet, the attitude is not quite so negative, but faith is not considered to have any really appropriate part in the scientific process. Tentative belief in postulated hypotheses, yes, but faith, with its smacks of religiosity, no.

Within the spiritual psychologies, faith is often seen as standing for irrational belief also, including such irrational beliefs as faith in the unlimited power of rationality. But faith is also used to indicate guiding one's actions through evidence about things that are

not physical. That is, faith can represent a conviction based on very substantial evidence about spiritual realities which can never be translated into

dily observable, physical manifestations. Thus faith in religious teaching brought about by witnessing miracles, for example, can be seen as a rather inferior form of faith because it still uses physical reality as its ultimate testing point, while the faith that has an experiential basis in spiritual realities alone can be a very important tool in spiritual growth.

Assumption: Emotions are electrical and chemical shifts within the nervous system.

This assumption is similar to the ones that thoughts or symbols are "nothing but" electrochemical patterns in the nervous system. Emotions are reduced to "nothing but" neurohumoral chemicals in the bloodstream interacting with various brain processes in specific areas of the brain, like the hypothalamus and limbic system. This kind of assumption leads directly into the "chemical psychiatry" approach to achieving happiness. If emotions are nothing but chemical and electrical patterns, then injecting the right

chemical substance in the bloodstream can clearly enhance desired emotions and suppress undesired emotions.

The spiritual psychologies do not make this reduction of emotional events strictly to physical events. Emotion is viewed as a type of consciousness energy and/or as the activation of particular parts of the mind and nervous system, and as potentially having far greater consequences than merely electrochemical shifts within the brain and body. Emotion, for example, can be seen as a kind of "fuel" which, if used properly, can allow the attainment of higher states of consciousness and consequent spiritual growth. As with thought, many of the spiritual psychologies assume that emotion can have a direct effect on others and external reality, that it is not totally confined within the nervous system unless expressed by overt motor acts.

Assumption: Negative emotions are the inevitable lot of man.

Emotions such as anxiety, fear, sorrow, depression, anger, jealousy, and the like are seen as built into our human nature, built into our physiology, and although we try to avoid them, even a relatively

well-adjusted person is expected to experience these emotions occasionally. [. . .] If someone claims not to have these emotions, we suspect that he is lying or simply unaware of himself. Freud's psychology has had a major hand in strengthening this assumption, and although few psychologists would call themselves Freudians, almost all have been influenced by Freud to a greater or lesser extent. The Freudian view of man is that under a thin veneer of civilization and control lurk primitive drives for sexual expression and self-aggrandizement that must be at least partially satisfied within the compromise structures that civilization allows. One has to expect a fair amount of negative emotions in such a creature.

The spiritual psychologies certainly recognize these negative emotions, but often point out that we set up conditions to help bring about their fulfillment. We may learn from these negative emotions if we have a goal of spiritual growth and/or we may learn to completely eliminate these negative emotions. The ordinary range of negative human emotions is not considered inevitable in many of the spiritual psychologies.

Assumption: There are no higher emotions; all emotions are basically self-serving and animal.

This ties in with the previous assumption that we know range of real human emotions, they are mostly negative, and the best we can do is try to minimize the negative emotions and enjoy and increase the positive emotions such as joy, pleasure, and excitement. Reports of "mystical ecstasy" or "higher emotions" are looked upon either as myths or as possible indicators of serious psychopathology.

Some of the spiritual psychologies stress, on the contrary, that the range of emotions that most human beings go through is the lowest range of emotions for human beings, and that there are higher emotions such as love, compassion, and ecstasy that are far more real to those who experience them than the ordinary human emotions. The orthodox, Western assumption about love is that one should be suspicious of it: it is a combination of sexual desire and other desires for pleasure attached to another person and rationalized as being selfless, when actually it is quite self-serving. The spiritual psychologies generally recog-

nize this about ordinary love, but do insist that there is a higher form of love which is indeed selfless and far more powerful than ordinary love.

Assumption: Memory is not very reliable: it is far better to depend on an objective record.

At first glance this seems like a fairly good assumption: we have a great deal of psychological research demonstrating that memory can fail to retrieve all sorts of information and that memory has many distortions involved in the retrieval of other information that makes it quite inaccurate. The tricky part of this assumption, however, is the attribution of truth or virtual infallibility to "objective" records, to written accounts or photographs or movies or video tapes or audio tape recordings. When an "objective" record apparently verifies what we want to be true, we forget how much the making and interpreting of "objective" records are affected by human desires.

I believe the spiritual psychologies would generally emphasize that we make a fetish of "objectivity" because this happens to meet various current desires, but we are not at all that objective. Indeed, it could be argued that "objec-

tive" records are not very important, since they cannot store some of the most vital aspects of information with respect to human life in general and the spiritual in particular. Thus human memories must be the standard for certain kinds of experiences, and it is believed that in various higher states of consciousness memory may function with far greater accuracy than in ordinary life.

Assumption: The only memory we have is of impressions in this life up to the present moment.

The assumption that man is born as a tabula rasa, a blank tablet, as far as memory is concerned is generally implicitly held. Impressions start coming in from the moment of birth, although they are not really organized in the infant and so not available later as memories. But as cognitive processes begin to create order out of the infant's world, he starts storing up memories of what has happened to him, what he has been told, what he has read. That is all there is in memory.

Many of the spiritual psychologies would not limit memory to this life. Some believe that memories of infancy can be recalled under proper

circumstances, and that memories of intrauterine life can also be recalled. Further, some assume that racial memories, actual memory information passed on to us as part of our heritage of being human beings, can be recalled, and others believe that information about previous lives can be recalled. All of the spiritual psychologies then grant man a much wider span of memories to be drawn upon in the course of spiritual development. The Buddha, for example, is reported to have remembered all of his past incarnations while he was working through his enlightenment experience, and to have then made further personality changes in himself as a result of this recall, solidifying and expanding his enlightenment.

Assumption: Perception is somewhat selective and biased, but generally gives us a very good picture of the world around us.

This is a particularly interesting assumption, for it is implicitly made all the time by orthodox, Western psychologists in spite of a wealth of evidence they themselves have collected to show that perception is extremely selective and biased, depending on one's upbringing,

needs, and all sorts of nonconscious processes. All that evidence, though, applies to subjects in experiments: when I, as a psychologist, look at something, I pretty much see it the way it is. This assumption is hardly limited to psychologists.

The spiritual psychologies generally take a position much more toward the view that most perception is quite biased and distorted by our desires and wishes. Thus, instead of beginning with an idea that we have a relatively good picture of ourselves and the world, spiritual psychologies start with the conception that we have a very poor picture of ourselves and the world, and the manifold selective processes and distortions in our perceptions must slowly be stripped away in the course of spiritual development.

Assumption: Being a scientist and being a mystic are incompatible.

If a person is a good, competent scientist, the orthodox Western assumption is that he cannot be a mystic, doing "weird" things inside his head at the same time. A great gulf is considered to exist between the types of mentalities necessary for these two roles. Since being a mystic is considered

pathological by most orthodox psychologists, this gulf is a good thing. One of the most deprecating remarks you could make about a scientist's work is to say that it shows signs of being "mystical."

In spite of this assumption, there are many historical examples of scientists who have also been mystics. Pascal, for example, had mystical experiences of considerable intensity. I do not believe the spiritual psychologies would see anything necessarily incompatible with being both a scientist and a mystic; it is a matter of balance, just as the active, conquering and the passive, receptive attitude must be balanced in the individual.

This concludes our all too brief and incomplete look at some of the implicit assumptions of orthodox, Western psychology. Note that I am *not* saying the implicit assumptions of orthodox, Western psychology are *wrong* and those of the spiritual psychologies are *right*: I do not know where the balance of rightness and wrongness lies. But it is clear that as long as assumptions are implicit, we have no opportunity to question them and possibly escape from their controlling power over us. If this [material] succeeds in raising some serious questions about implicit assumptions for some readers, it has served its purpose. ☉

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