

## WHO'S AFRAID OF PSYCHIC POWERS? ME?

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Charles Tart is professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis. He is a former president of the Parapsychological Association. His publications include: *Altered States of Consciousness*; *Transpersonal Psychologies*; *Learning to Use Extrasensory Perception*; *Psi: Scientific Studies of the Psychic Realm*; and numerous scientific articles. The following article has been greatly condensed, with permission, from two articles which were published in Dr. Tart's newsletter, *The Open Mind* (see reference section). Those who wish may write to Dr. Tart at P.O. Box 37, El Cerrito, California 94530.



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Some years ago I was at a reception following a lecture I gave to leading parapsychologists. I mentioned that I had observed occasional fear of psi in myself and wondered whether anyone else had experienced this. My question fell absolutely flat; no one responded. Was I the only one who had ever felt any fear of psi? That seemed unlikely. I then wondered whether some people were indeed fearful but did not want to face their fears. To test this possibility, I devised a "belief experiment" and tried it on the spot.

I began the experiment by asking my colleagues to believe, as well as they could for 10 minutes, what I told them, and then to observe their reactions to this belief. I went on to explain that I had developed a new drug, "telepathine." The drug had one major, permanent effect: it would enable those who took it to telepathically receive *all* the thoughts and feelings of everyone in a 100-yard range. Moreover, there was no antidote to the drug. I then asked, "Who wants the drug?" No hands went up, but an abstract discussion began about the possibilities and implications. This was clearly avoidance of my question. I asked again, "Who wants the drug?" More abstractions, so I finally shouted, "WHO WANTS THE DRUG?" Still no hands went up; there was just silence. As people observed their inner moods, they realized that when faced with the possibility that telepathy might indeed work very well, even if only in a belief experiment, reservations based on fears arose. My point was made.

This experiment was done with people who were exceptionally interested in psi, willing to sacrifice career success to work in this controversial field. If parapsychologists have fears, what about ordinary people? What about people who vehemently deny that there is psi? And what is the basis of these fears?

One possible explanation for fear of psi may be found in my "social masking theory of psi inhibition" (1982). Ordinary social interaction is strongly guided by an implicit social contract: "I want to be known on *my* terms. If you will accept the image of myself that I want to project, I will accept the image of yourself that you want to project." We are all very good at controlling which image we project and, although we sometimes wonder what is really behind

someone else's behavior, psychological observations indicate that we frequently do not use our senses well when looking behind social facades. We often accept, without question, the images others project, especially if they fit our expectations! Therefore, psi abilities can be a potent threat to the social status quo.

The social conflicts which strongly functioning psi could bring about are reason enough for fears of psi to exist; however, I suspect that there is an even deeper level of conflict, which I have elaborated in my "primal conflict repression theory" (1982). Let us start by discussing socialization.

We are born with an enormous number of potentials, many of which will not be developed, largely because of the culture in which we are raised. In the course of its history, each culture elaborates only a certain number of human potentials; others are lost to ignorance and some are suppressed, as they are considered "evil."

Parents are the primary agents of enculturation: they have the job of shaping the developing child so that he/she becomes "normal," gives up certain innate potentialities and develops only certain others. This is done so that the child will be like everybody else in fundamentally important respects. This is a tough job: many times parents must not show their own true feelings, but must act to train the child "properly." The pressure of this task has been particularly strong on mothers, who are taught that they are responsible for the health, happiness and welfare of their children. They are pressured to be "supermothers," *always* loving and caring. Since no woman wants to be considered a bad mother, this pressure from the culture is often internalized.

I believe that mothers and children have a strong, innate telepathic link, which conveys emotion more than conceptual information. This link probably has a lot of survival value: think of those situations in which a mother just has this "feeling" that something is wrong with her distant infant, only to find the child in danger when she goes to check her "hunch." How will this telepathic linkage affect the child when "supermother" is acting? She has had a bad day, everything has gone wrong, and her child has just broken her prized heirloom vase. A real mother might like to "break" the child at that point, or at least throw a tantrum herself. But "supermother" is not supposed to show her anger. She is supposed to gently explain that it is wrong to break things, that punishment is just to ensure that the child learns the right thing, and any slight emotional upset she shows is based on her motherly concern, not because she is angry! What happens telepathically in this sort of situation? The child gets one message on the overt level: "I'm only concerned with your welfare, I love you." This is the socially approved message that the child *must* believe: it reinforces mother's own beliefs about herself and the image she wants to project to her peers. Yet telepathically the child is picking up the strong, emotional message: "Mommy is very angry, she hates me!" How does the child deal with this double, contradictory message?

The theory of primal conflict repression states that early, primary conflicts are dealt with by actively repressing our psychic abilities. If the psi information can be stopped, not attended to, or invalidated as "fantasy," then one side of the conflicting message and the conflict itself *seems* to go away. You only hear the sensory communication which

“supermother” (and the culture behind her) wants you to hear. The child can then go along with the “supermother” image the parent wants to project. Besides, mommy will only get angrier if told by her child, “No, you’re lying to me, you’re really angry!”

Let us assume that you are a “normal” adult: overall your behavior is acceptable, your culture functions unconsciously inside your head, shaping your thoughts and feelings, controlling your behavior. Like all “normal” people, you probably have some doubts about whether you are really normal: you know some of your thoughts and feelings are strange and “bad” by social standards, but you hide them well from others and pass as normal. Along comes someone talking about psychic powers, reading people’s minds, predicting the future, bending spoons, etc. You converse with this person about psi in a perfectly rational way, that is, on the surface; but what happens underneath? That depends on your particular personality structure, your degree of self-knowledge, the intensity and reality of the apparent psi phenomena, and your style of resolving conflicts. Any of several unconscious reactions could take place and affect your apparently rational, overt response.

*Primal denial.* Some part of your unconscious mind may make the connection, “To acknowledge telepathy means to acknowledge that mommy hated me!” This puts it in rather extreme form, but unconscious thinking tends to be like that. The strength and course of this reaction will be affected by the degree to which you have already accepted the fact that your mother was occasionally angry at you: she was a real person and sometimes you drove her crazy! On the other hand, you may have thoroughly repressed that knowledge and invested your self-concept in the image of a mother who was perfect; therefore, rather than face the repressed memories, your unconscious may influence your conscious mind to deny the reality of telepathy and other psi abilities. If there is no telepathy, there is no need to examine potentially unpleasant memories!

*Secondary denial.* The idea of psi could also activate concern about those unacceptable parts of yourself that you do not want others to know about. Realistically, we all have secrets that we may not even be ashamed of but which could cause us harm if revealed. However, many of the things we are ashamed of may actually be things that everybody shares, even if they do not admit to them; they could be things that are actually minor embarrassments blown up out of proportion in our own minds.

Depending on your degree of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, psi powers can seem an inconvenience or a terrible threat. Strong repression of your emotional reaction may take place (perhaps in conjunction with primal denial), so that you deny that psi abilities exist, thus apparently avoiding the conflict. If someone keeps on talking about psi abilities and your mind has chosen a repression/denial defense, what happens? This objectionable person keeps right on stimulating your conflict and triggering your defenses. You can either leave the situation, allow repression to help you forget about it and hopefully not come into contact with people who talk about (much less demonstrate) psi, or you can counterattack.

*Counterattack defenses.* A defensive individual might label the person who talks about psi a “kook,” a misguided fool who ought to know better, or a “charlatan” who swindles the gullible. Derogatory labeling invalidates what such people say. Another form of counterattack is to accept the existence of psi abilities, but to label them “evil.” If

something is evil you stay away from it, discourage its manifestation in yourself and others, and try to stop (if not actively punish) people who represent evil.

The fear of openness to psychic communication is very similar to the fear we have about being open in general. The metaphor of taking the hypothetical drug, “telepathine,” is a particular (and extreme) way of talking about being very open to other people. The reality we live with is that we already have marvelously receptive physical senses that can tell us enormous amounts of things about our world and the other people in it, *if* we pay attention to these senses. By observing your state of mind when you do not listen, when you turn your eyes away, when you ignore your bodily feelings, when you suppress your emotions or pretend that they are something else, you can witness the basis of your fear of being fully alive to reality generally and your fear of psi specifically.

In a personal communication to me, Arthur Hastings, Dean of the California Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, provided three related observations about fear of psi based on threats to our beliefs about personal identity: (1) Psychic perceptions go beyond the boundary of the self, thus being outside the familiar territory of one’s motives, perceptions, and feelings; like stepping off a cliff, this venture into the void is frightening. (2) The reality of psychic perceptions requires one to redefine the self; there seems to be no boundary between one ego and another. Egos do not like this at all. (3) The existence of psychic abilities violates our Western cultural beliefs — that is a big system to contradict, especially since the beliefs are somewhat interdependent, and many of our ideas, actions and guidelines depend on not having psi communication.

These observations fit nicely when considering the process of identification. We give this special, “This is *me!*” quality to certain aspects of our experience, thus empowering them to have first (and vital) priority on our attention, energies, resources and emotions, compared to merely “factual” information/experience. Our cultural conditioning trains us to identify: designates which things are culturally appropriate to identify with, and rewards us with belonging and other forms of social approval when we comply. Psychic experiences and abilities drastically challenge our individual cultural beliefs about where “I” leave off and “others” begin. Since our cultural conditioning has made feelings of happiness, security and belongingness contingent on being “normal,” psychic perceptions could be very threatening. A person must have attained a high degree of cultural transcendence and reached a mature acceptance of his/her real, essential self before being able to comfortably deal with the full implications of psychic perceptions.

Suppose you had a sudden increase in psi powers? You could read people’s minds, influence events so you become very “lucky,” subtly (or not so subtly) affect people’s thoughts, pry out hidden knowledge. What then? How would you behave? How would you think of yourself? Our culture has almost no guidelines to offer, except the negative ones: “You’re deluding yourself, you can’t do these things, you’re crazy!” or “These things come from the Devil!” Responses such as those would cause you to feel very bad about your new gifts and would make you feel isolated from the support and sympathy of others. If you were not already well integrated, this drastic withdrawal of support, the fear of being “caught,” or the opposition that would result from others’ fears when they discovered your strange abilities, might indeed push you toward insanity. I suspect that if psychic abilities occur in a person who has not finished with

ordinary social/personality development, special problems may arise. The development of psychic abilities should occur gradually, in tandem with gradual maturation in all areas of life.

Parapsychological research limps along now with inadequate funding and, for the most part, only low level, unreliable psi functioning. But science sometimes has lucky breaks. "Telepathine," or its equivalent, could be invented tomorrow. Will you be ready?

#### References

- Tart, C. Who's Afraid of Psychic Powers? Me? Part 1. *The Open Mind*, 1983, 1, 3, 1-5.  
 Tart, C. Who's Afraid of Psychic Powers? Me? Part 2. *The Open Mind*, 1984, 1, 5, 1-5.  
 Tart, C. The Controversy About Psi: Two Psychological Theories. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 1982, 46, 313-320.

#### Suggested Reading

- Hastings, A. A Counseling Approach to Parapsychological Experience. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1983, 15, 143-168.

### INFORMATION SOUGHT FOR MANUSCRIPTS CATALOG

A universal union catalog of archival and manuscript collections in psychical research and spiritualism is being compiled by James G. Matlock. The catalog will include collections from around the world: in archival institutions, in parapsychological centers, and in private hands. Psychical research and spiritualism are emphasized, but significant collections in related areas, such as Theosophy and the occult, will be included. This catalog will contain only materials dating from the mid-19th century onward. Although no size limit is placed on collections, no special effort will be made to locate individual items in collections which do not center on the abovementioned subjects. The catalog presently covers well over 200 collections, primarily derived from published sources. If you have information about relevant papers in private hands, please write to Mr. Matlock at the following address: 2913 P Street, NW, Washington, DC 20007.

## CALL FOR PAPERS 1986 PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION CONVENTION

The 29th annual convention of the Parapsychological Association will be held August 5-9, 1986 at Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, California. Persons interested in attending the convention may write to the Arrangements Chairperson, Robert Quider, JFK University, 12 Altarinda Road, Orinda, CA 94563.

Please read this call carefully; there are changes in the instructions from previous years, which are intended to facilitate archival publication. All submissions must be carefully edited and finished in camera-ready form for inclusion in the *Convention Proceedings*.

Anyone may submit a paper or a poster for consideration by the Program Committee. Papers may be empirical, theoretical or methodological in nature. The Program Committee will not consider papers published elsewhere prior to the convention.

Papers should adhere to the style of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (3rd edition). They should be typed on one side of 8½ x 11 or A4 paper with minimum margins of one-inch on all sides. The first sheet should have a centered title, author(s) and affiliation, followed by an abstract of no more than 300 words.

Text should not exceed 12 single-spaced pages (6,000 words), with no more than five additional pages for essential figures, tables and references. If possible, prepare and submit one single-spaced copy and three double-spaced copies; otherwise send four single-spaced copies. Four copies of proposed papers must be received by the Program Chairman by April 30, 1986.

Presentation time will be 20-30 minutes, including a question period. Specify exactly any audio-visual equipment you will need, and who (in papers with multiple authors) will make the presentation. *In absentia* presentations will be allowed only in exceptional circumstances.

Posters are brief papers or other material presented on poster-board in a location apart from the convention floor.

Proposals for posters must include four copies of all material to be presented and the size of the required posterboards; photocopies of photographs are acceptable. This material must reach the Program Chairman by April 30, 1986.

Members and associates of the Parapsychological Association may propose symposia, panel discussions and workshops. *Symposia* are formal presentations by participants on related topics. Proposals for symposia must include four copies of a summary sheet indicating title, chairperson, participants, order of presentation and proposed time allotments (up to a total of 90 minutes, including discussion period). Proposals must also include a full paper, prepared as detailed above, from each participant. This complete package must reach the Program Chairman by April 30, 1986.

*Panel Discussions* are informal, round-table discussions intended to maximize spontaneous interactions of participants and audience. Formal presentations should not exceed five minutes. Proposals for panel discussions must include four copies of (1) a summary sheet that includes a title, chairperson, participants, order of presentation, time allotments (up to a total of 90 minutes), and (2) an abstract of less than 500 words from each panelist. The complete package must reach the Program Chairman by April 30, 1986.

*Workshops* are informal presentations, discussions or demonstrations. Proposals for workshops should provide a title, chairperson, participants and description of workshop activity. Workshops will not be listed as part of the formal convention program, but will be announced during the convention. Workshop proposals will be accepted until June 15, 1986.

Address all correspondence regarding the program to: Dr. Roger Nelson, Chairman, Parapsychological Association Program Committee, School of Engineering/Applied Science, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544.