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ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

REVISED & UPDATED



Edited by Charles T. Tart

Altered States of Consciousness

*Edited by
Charles T. Tart*

Third Edition



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Transpersonal Psychologies. New York: Harper & Row, 1975 (editor and contributor).

States of Consciousness. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975.

The Application of Learning Theory to ESP Performance. New York: Parapsychology Foundation, Inc., 1975.

Symposium on Consciousness. New York: Viking Press, 1975 (with Lee, P., Ornstein, R., Galin, R., & Deikman, A.).

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Mind at Large: Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers Symposia on the Nature of Extrasensory Perception. New York: Praeger, 1979 (Tart, C., Puthoff, H., & Targ, R., editors and contributors).

Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential. Boston: New Science Library, 1986.

Open Mind, Discriminating Mind: Reflections on Human Possibilities. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.

*This book is dedicated to the memory of
my mother, Alma Tart, who did so much
to evoke my curiosity about the nature of
the mind. It is also dedicated to my wife,
Judy, who supports me and stimulates
my mind in so many ways, and to
my friend and devoted assistant,
Irene Segrest.*

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Introduction to the First Edition

CHARLES T. TART

Whenever I speak on the topic of dreams, I mention a very unusual sort of dream, the “lucid” dream (see chapter 8), in which the dreamer knows he is dreaming and feels fully conscious in the dream itself. After discussing some of the philosophical and semantic difficulties in defining states of consciousness, I always ask whether anyone has the slightest doubt that he is awake, that is, in a “normal” state of consciousness at that moment; I have never found anyone who had difficulty in making this distinction.

In introducing a book of readings on altered states of consciousness, I find myself in a similar position: there is a multitude of philosophical and semantic problems in defining just what “normal” consciousness and “altered” states of consciousness are, yet at this instant I have not the slightest doubt that I am in my normal state of consciousness. Yet there have been a number of occasions in my life when I have not had the slightest difficulty in realizing that I was in an altered state of consciousness (ASC). Thus I shall give only the simplest sort of definition of what an ASC is here and let the articles in this book flesh it out: our knowledge of ASCs is too incomplete at this time for a tight conceptualization.

For any given individual, his normal state of consciousness is the one in which he spends the major part of his waking hours. That your normal state of consciousness and mine are quite similar and are similar to that of all other normal men is an almost universal assumption, albeit one of questionable validity. An altered state of consciousness for a given individual is one in which he clearly feels a *qualitative* shift in his pattern of mental functioning,¹ that is, he feels not just a quantitative shift (more or less alert, more or less visual imagery, sharper or duller, etc.), but also that some quality or

qualities of his mental processes are *different*. Mental functions operate that do not operate at all ordinarily, perceptual qualities appear that have no normal counterparts, and so forth. There are numerous borderline cases in which the individual cannot clearly distinguish just how his state of consciousness is different from normal, where quantitative changes in mental functioning are very marked, and so on, but the existence of borderline states and difficult-to-describe effects does not negate the existence of feelings of clear, qualitative changes in mental functioning that are the criterion of ASCs. This book is concerned with those states of consciousness in which the individual feels one or more qualitative (and possibly one or more quantitative) shifts in mental functioning, so that he believes himself to be in an ASC.

Within Western culture we have strong negative attitudes toward ASCs: there is the normal (good) state of consciousness and there are pathological changes in consciousness. Most people make no further distinctions. We have available a great deal of scientific and clinical material on ASCs associated with psychopathological states, such as schizophrenia: by comparison, our scientific knowledge about ASCs which could be considered "desirable" is extremely limited and generally unknown to scientists. One of the purposes of these articles is to begin to provide some balance; therefore almost all the ASCs treated here have *positive* qualities in that they are ASCs that many people will go to considerable trouble and effort to induce in themselves because they feel that experiencing a particular ASC is rewarding. Our understanding of mental processes has been greatly facilitated by focusing on psychopathology, but it cannot be complete without looking at the other side of the coin. Further, we need to drop the "good" or "bad" judgments about various ASCs and concentrate on the question, What are the characteristics of a given ASC and what consequences do these characteristics have on behavior in various settings?

A normal state of consciousness can be considered a resultant of living in a particular environment, both physical and psychosocial. Thus the normal state of consciousness for any individual is one that has adaptive value within his particular culture and environment; we would expect the normal state of consciousness to show qualitatively and/or quantitatively different aspects from one culture to

another. But one of the most common cognitive errors made is what Carl Jung has called the fallacy of the psychologist projecting his own psychology upon the patient, that is, we almost always make the implicit assumption that everybody else thinks and experiences about the same way as we do, with the exception of "crazy" people. In a broader perspective it is clear that man has functioned in a multitude of states of consciousness and that different cultures have varied enormously in recognition and utilization of, and attitudes toward, ASCs. Many "primitive" peoples, for example, believe that almost every normal adult has the ability to go into a trance state and be possessed by a god; the adult who cannot do this is a psychological cripple. How deficient Americans would seem to a person from such a culture. In many Eastern civilizations, elaborate techniques have been developed for inducing and utilizing ASCs, such as the Yoga and Zen systems.² In some cases vocabularies have been developed for talking about these ASCs more adequately. I recall Fredrick Spiegelberg, the noted Indian scholar, pointing out that Sanskrit has about 20 nouns which we translate into "consciousness" or "mind" in English because we do not have the vocabulary to specify the different shades of meaning in these words (Spiegelberg, Fadiman, & Tart, 1964).

Within our Western culture we have several commonly used words for naming some ASCs, such as trance, hypnosis, dream, and ecstasy, but none of them are very clearly defined. It could be expected that within psychology and psychiatry there would be far more exact terms for describing various ASCs and their components, but except for a rich (but often not precise) vocabulary dealing with psychopathological states, this is not true. A few years ago, for example, I tried to find a clear definition of the word "trance," a very common psychological term, used in an explanatory as well as a descriptive sense. To my surprise, for every defining characteristic of a trance mentioned by one authority, another authority would use the opposite characteristic. Formal psychology in this century simply has not dealt with ASCs, especially positive ASCs, to any reasonable extent, considering their potential importance.

If one (perhaps naively) assumes that the distribution of expended energies in the psychological sciences should show some relation to what is important in affecting people's behavior rather than just

being related to what is methodologically convenient to investigate, then this neglect of ASCs by the psychological sciences is strange and has become increasingly incongruent with what has happened in American society in the past decade of the "psychedelic revolution." The discrepancies will almost certainly become even greater over the next decade as the present trends continue. I shall not attempt to describe the whole "hippie" movement since it is too diverse, but judging by the more conservative writers in the mass media, there are tens of thousands of people who are *obviously* hippies in their life style and hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of "respectable" middle-class people who are experimenting with drug trips, meditation, sensory awareness, encounter groups, intentional communities, dream interpretation, and so forth (see, e.g., Rosenfeld & Farrell, 1966). I see these trends primarily in terms of the interests and activities of psychologists, undergraduate psychology majors, and psychology graduate students in my everyday life; the change over the past few years has been remarkable. When I was a graduate student a few years ago, I found almost no one who shared my interest in ASCs: today it is commonplace for graduate students to discuss their meditation experiences, their drug experiences, and their plans to work in these areas as psychologists. Five years ago a person who mentioned at a party that he had taken LSD-25 became the center of attention: now descriptions of psychedelic experiences are too commonplace to attract special attention. As further illustration, in the last month two graduate students in physics have come to talk to me about their experiences of their "souls leaving their bodies"; a sociology graduate student told me about a group of students he meets with regularly to discuss what to do with your state of consciousness and style of life after exhausting the LSD-25 experience; a mathematics graduate student asked for a guide to the scientific literature on marijuana so he may compare these findings to his own experiences. These are not hippie students and they are no longer unusual. They are representatives of a whole new generation entering the conventional social power structure who spend much effort in exploring their own consciousness.

This upsurge of serious interest in and personal exploration of ASCs is likely to cause an important change in psychology as a discipline. Students come to talk with me in my role as a psychologist

because they believe that the science which treats the mind or behavior will help clarify their ASC experiences. I must tell them we have very little to offer. Undergraduates begin to major in psychology and find that we concentrate our research efforts of "methodologically sophisticated" approaches on what seem to them trivial problems. They can meditate for a month or take a psychedelic drug and have overwhelming psychological effects in their minds: if psychologists largely ignore this whole area, the students then dismiss psychology as an academic word game of no importance. And, in my experience, these are some of the very brightest students. Among graduate students I have talked to, particularly in West Coast universities, the same trend is evident: a great dissatisfaction with the conventional areas of psychology and a questioning of whether training in psychology is worthwhile in terms of their interests. I suspect that within a few years the psychology graduate school that does not offer course work and research opportunities in ASCs simply will not attract many bright students. Nonacademic centers such as Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California, are arising to fill some of this need.

This is not to denigrate the valuable research that has been done in psychology these many years: it is simply saying that the profession must pay adequate attention to these areas of such importance to students if we want to avoid losing some good potential psychologists.

The need for a shift in emphasis in psychology is based on more important considerations than attracting bright students in the future, however. The actual behavior of an important segment of our population, the students and the middle-class intellectuals, is increasingly involved with producing and using ASCs. Yet our scientific knowledge of the nature and effects of these ASCs is so limited that we can offer little sound guidance on public policy with respect to such practices as psychedelic drug use. We cannot give much advice to individuals who wish to experience ASCs, nor can we adequately understand this significant portion of people's behavior.

This collection of articles is an attempt to begin to correct the situation by, hopefully, stimulating research on ASCs in the course of presenting material on them. To many people who are not involved in scientific research, valid knowledge about ASCs is to be obtained by

experiencing them; they are somehow beyond the reach of scientific research. The most important obligation of any science is that its descriptive and theoretical language embrace *all* the phenomena of its subject matter; the data from ASCs cannot be ignored if we are to develop a comprehensive psychology. Psychology has often failed to meet this obligation because of premature conceptualizations, that is, investing in simplified and elegant theoretical systems that exclude the data of ASCs, but this has been more a matter of the cultural climate than any inherent shortcoming of scientific method. Man is a theorizing and conceptualizing animal and does not accept experience in and of itself: he always develops beliefs and theories about his experience. The difficulty with studying ASCs by simply experiencing them is that we run as much risk of systematizing our delusions as of discovering “truth.” When we complement personal experience with scientific method, the risk of simply systematizing our delusions is considerably reduced. Thus the hope of stimulating research on ASCs is the prime reason for assembling these articles.

The readings in this collection cover a wide range of ASCs; they are presented in groups, beginning with some ASCs available to almost everyone (the hypnagogic state and the dream state), continuing with more specialized and powerful ASCs (meditation, hypnosis, minor and major psychedelic drugs), and ending with the psychophysiology of some ASCs (including the most modern technique for producing an ASC—electroencephalographic feedback). More than 1,000 references to scientific literature relating to ASCs are contained in the articles and they should serve to guide the serious researcher to a vast amount of background literature. The papers range from relatively “hardheaded” experimental articles to very speculative ones. This variability occurs because our knowledge of ASCs is highly variable. My primary criterion for selecting papers is that they be provocative as well as sound: many of the phenomena reported will seem preposterous, impossible, and “unscientific.” This simply reflects the limitations of our knowledge. I hope that those readers who are incensed by various articles will sublimate your anger into research.

ASCs are going to become increasingly important in modern life. With proper research our knowledge of them can be immensely

enriched very quickly and it is my hope that this book will stimulate research in this area.

Davis, California

June 12, 1968

Note to the second printing. Since the original printing of this book, there have been no radical advances in understanding ASCs, although some promising theoretical beginnings have been made. Theories that see the mind as processing information in the way a computer does are represented in the writings of Blum (1961), Lilly (1968), and Tart (1972c). A number of attempts to understand ASCs in neurological terms have been made: the work of Fischer and his colleagues is an excellent example (Fischer, 1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1971; Fischer, Hill, Thatcher & Scheib, 1970; Fischer, Hill, & Warshay, 1969; Landon & Fischer, 1970). Nevertheless, the conceptual gap between knowing that a certain neurological function changes during a given ASC and understanding the *experiential*, psychological functioning of that ASC is enormous, and I see neurological approaches as ancillary to the need for psychological understanding of ASCs. Wapnick (1969) has also recently presented some interesting comparisons between mystic states of consciousness and schizophrenia.

NOTES

1. For those who prefer a behavioristic approach, an ASC is a hypothetical construct invoked when an S's behavior (including the behavior of verbal report) is radically different from his ordinary behavior.
2. Many techniques for inducing ASCs were developed in Christian mysticism, but these were not as elaborate as the Eastern techniques and no longer represent an important element in contemporary Western culture.