

Spirituality and Religion

Adapted in part from the Introduction to: **The End of Materialism**
Charles Tart, PhD

Noted science writer Sharon Begley reported how His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the highest-ranking lama in Tibetan Buddhism and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, watched a brain operation while on a visit to an American medical school. He recalled scientists explaining with great conviction that consciousness is nothing more than a manifestation of brain activity. When the brain stops functioning, from injury or death, our mind vanishes—period, end of story.

But Begley reports, the Dalai Lama had always been bothered by the seeming certainty of this kind of “explaining away” of consciousness. Even if you accept the theory that our minds are what our brains do, that our emotions and thoughts are expressions of brain activity, isn’t there more? Isn’t some kind of two-way causation possible?

Could it be, as common sense seems to tell us, that mind might have an active reality of its own rather than just being a by-product of brain activity? His Holiness voiced this question to the chief surgeon.

Begley reports that the brain surgeon hardly paused before authoritatively answering no—period. What we call consciousness or mind is nothing but a product of the physical operation of the brain. The Dalai Lama is a very polite person, and he let the matter drop. He was used to hearing such absolute statements from people who consider themselves scientists.

But, as Begley quotes from the Dalai Lama's 2005 book, *The Universe in a Single Atom*, “I thought then and still think that there is yet no scientific basis for such a categorical claim...The view that all mental processes are necessarily physical processes is a metaphysical assumption, not a scientific fact”

On Seeking the Spiritual as a Scientist

“Seeking” is a word commonly associated with spiritual pursuits, but “science” and “scientist” are usually associated with a materialistic view of the universe in which there’s nothing real to the “spiritual,” so how could a scientist seek the spiritual? Wouldn’t such seeking lead to intellectual and emotional conflicts that could be confusing and invalidating, as well as a waste of time?

Indeed, that's how it is for a lot of people today. Something in them seeks, often desperately, something "spiritual" to make their lives authentic and worthwhile, yet no intelligent person can disregard modern science and its understandings without mentally harming themselves in various ways. But modern science, which has given us so much materially, tells "spiritual seekers" that they're, at best, softheaded folks unwilling to be completely scientific and, at worst, superstitious fools, perhaps having a serious psychopathology that drives them to seek the "spiritual."

It was probably simpler in the old days: you believed or disbelieved the one religion given you in your village, and that was it. There wasn't much in the way of competing views. Now we have so much information! Tart says, here I am, for example, a constantly fluctuating mixture of scientist; father; husband; psychologist; parapsychologist; teacher; writer; carpenter; bulldozer operator; liberal; conservative; skeptic; and serious off-and-on student of Buddhism, Christianity, Sufism, Yoga, the Fourth Way, and aikido, believing we have the potential of gods, believing we're usually practically mindless robots, and so on. That's a lot of information and roles to balance! And besides offering ideas, many of these spiritual paths say it's not enough to just think about and believe or disbelieve their ideas—you can and should live your life so that you can have direct personal experience of them.

On Spirituality and Religion

There is an important distinction to make about science and *spirituality*, not about science and *religion*. Although they can't be totally separated in reality since the distinction oversimplifies a complex human situation. Tart and many other writers use the term *spirituality* to refer to life-changing, primary *experiences* that happen to *individuals*, while *religion* refers to social organizations and beliefs that develop and become relatively fixed and institutionalized. Such organizations and belief systems are usually initiated by spiritual experiences of the religion's founder, and these organizations and belief systems incorporate and develop (with more or less fidelity) those basic experiences into ongoing social structures, relationships, beliefs, needs, and customs.

Tart's focus then is on the degree to which you can be scientifically oriented and yet seek and value personal spiritual experience and growth without the doubt and conflict generated by regarding yourself as "irrational," "unscientific," or "crazy." Because there are many psychological and social factors that enter in, once spirituality becomes religion, the distinction isn't quite as clear-cut as we might

like it to be. We humans are social creatures, and this can affect, to some degree, the very spiritual experiences we have in the first place, as well as our ongoing interpretation and understanding of them afterward. Most of us need some ongoing social support in our spiritual lives, so I doubt we'll ever have a "pure" spirituality unaffected by religion. It must also be the case that even religions that have changed considerably from the spiritual experiences that underlie them must still satisfy at least some people's spiritual longings if the religions are to survive.

That's the rational part of the distinction between spirituality and religion. Now, let's move on to the more difficult emotional level. For Tart, the word "religion" connotes the particular church he was raised in (Lutheran), its doctrines, and the effects on his personality or self that he can now recognize from a wiser (he hopes), adult perspective. On the one hand, there were many good effects: a concern for the welfare of others; a basic belief in some kind of wise, loving, and caring intelligence in the universe; and numerous instances of experiencing kindness and care from adults in the church that helped shape him.

Tart also thinks a lot of his neurotic shortcomings stem from or were reinforced by church doctrines, such as feelings of being inherently sinful, a nagging feeling that no matter how good he is it'll never be enough, and a pervasive shame about his body and sexuality that has taken many years to largely overcome. In many ways, he thinks he was forcibly brainwashed in being taught his religion when he was too young to really understand and make choices. So "religion," for him, is a complicated category with conscious, semiconscious, and undoubtedly unconscious strong feelings, positive and negative, that can create conflicts and tension. Perhaps, you recognize yourself in this description!

"Spirituality" Tart says has been a matter of a relatively conscious choice on his part as an adult, and the aspects of it he's chosen to make central in his life have given him goals and guidance that have added much meaning and satisfaction.

So the rational distinction between spirituality and religion -- primary, life-changing experiences of the spiritual versus institutionalized, socialized doctrines and practices -- is important to make. But lurking in the background are all these emotional elements, tending to make spirituality a "good" word and religion a "bad" word for many of us. At bodily and emotional levels, Tart says when I hear "religion," I tend to get a little tense and defensive, and when I hear "spirituality," I relax and open up. To the degree that I recognize these complexities and work on healing the emotional angles, I can be more rational and effective in what I write about and do.

Tart doesn't generalize further, because there are so many varieties of religion, and aside from their formal beliefs and structures, there are enormous variations in the way different individuals absorb and react to particular religions. By the time some of us reach adulthood, our childhood religions are a useful, and perhaps the best, vehicle for promoting and integrating our individual spiritual experiences, which in turn would further enliven our religions. For others of us, our childhood religions are the enemy of our spiritual growth. How it is for you is a matter for you to discover and work with.

The End of Materialism

The balance of Tart's book provides an overview of the foundations for and the status of research in each of several different research areas of psi (shorthand for the phenomena studied by parapsychologists). In each area Tart offers his opinion, as an experimental psychologist, on how convincing the evidence is for each phenomenon. Based on the evidence, he divides psi phenomena into two groups. Group One contains what he calls the "big five" and includes telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis and psychic healing. Tart concludes that each of these phenomena is supported by hundreds of rigorous scientific experiments. Group Two contains post-cognition, out-of-body experiences, near death experiences, after death communication and reincarnation. These phenomena Tart concludes don't have the level of support found for phenomena in Group One. However, he thinks the amount of evidence is such that they can't be dismissed out-of-hand and warrant continued investigation.

In an earlier review of the evidence for psi done by Dean Radin in his 1995 book, *The Conscious Universe*, Radin came to a similar conclusion. Radin indicates that the evidence spans 130 years of experiments, involves hundreds of experimenters, thousands of experiments and hundreds of replications. Radin goes into considerably more detail about the types of experimental evidence, including the methodologies used and the types of data analyses applied. One cannot read Radin's book with an open mind and not be convinced that the body of experimental evidence for psi phenomena clearly indicates that something worthy of serious consideration is going on. You can see the evidence for yourself at: <http://noetic.org/research/psi-research/>

Least you dismiss Tart and Radin as mere advocates for their personal views, let me offer you a quote from Carl Sagan who examined a lot of the evidence for paranormal claims while writing his 1995 book *The Demon Haunted World*.

"At the time of this writing there are three claims in the ESP field which, in my opinion, deserve serious study: (1) that by thought alone humans can (barely) affect random number generators in computers, (2) that people under mild sensory deprivation can receive thoughts or images "projected" at them; and (3) that young children sometimes report the details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation."

Science is first and foremost a methodology for examining hypotheses derived from theory. Scientific theory is an explanation that attempts to account for demonstrated facts. Western science is grounded in a theoretical paradigm generally known as *scientific materialism*. The core assumption of scientific materialism is that matter is primary and all phenomena can be understood by reducing them to their material elements and understanding how those elements interact. The world according to scientific materialism is built from the bottom up.

Scientific materialism has been the basic paradigm of science since the 17th century and is rooted in a Newtonian worldview. Scientific materialism has, in fact, been highly successful over a long period of time. Unfortunately, this has resulted in it becoming scientific dogma and science for many has become scientism or science that ultimately rests upon faith in dogma.

The evidence for psi poses a significant threat to scientific materialism because if the evidence is accepted as factual then scientific theory must account for it but the very nature of the phenomena suggests that it is not and cannot be explained as a product of matter. In short, acceptance of psi phenomena is to accept the real possibility that the core assumptions of scientific materialism are not valid. Thus, the greater one's faith in the core assumptions of scientific materialism the greater one's motivation to be blind to the evidence for and to deny the reality of psi phenomena. In short, to expose oneself as an adherent of scientism.

There are scientists willing to question the validity of the core assumptions of scientific materialism but they are in a minority and are often treated as heretics. Tart, Radin and Sagan clearly belong to that minority. There are other scientists who challenge scientific materialism on grounds other than psi. Physicist Bernard d'Espagnat writing in *Scientific American* stated, *"The doctrine that the world is made up of objects whose existence is independent of human consciousness turns out to be in conflict with quantum mechanics and with facts established by experiments."*

Another physicist, Victor Mansfield, suggests that mind and matter may be part of *"...a radically interconnected and interdependent world, one so essentially connected at a deep level that the interconnections are more fundamental, more real than the independent existence of the parts."*

The esteemed Sir James Jean, after pondering the implications of quantum physics, said as long ago as 1948, *"The universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine."*

Within the physics community there is a recognition of what is often referred to as "the problem of consciousness" raised by experimental tests of quantum physics. The majority of physicists prefer to ignore the implications of this "problem" and dismiss it as either an "artifact of measurement" or not a scientific problem but a problem better left to philosophers. The minority who treat the problem as a scientific problem find that the evidence suggests that consciousness not matter may be primary. If consciousness is required to collapse a wave into a particle (i.e. to produce matter) then consciousness is an antecedent of matter and matter therefore cannot be primary. If consciousness is primary, the world is constructed from the top down. This reasoning is a significant challenge to the core assumptions of scientific materialism because this conception can potentially explain psi phenomena whereas they are inexplicable in a primacy of matter model.

One physicist who instead of denying that there is a problem has taken the challenge seriously. David Deutsch is an advocate for the multiverse or many worlds theory as a way of explaining away the apparent role of consciousness in quantum wave collapses. The multiverse theory would seem to provide continued support for the primacy of matter. Deutsch suggests that consciousness only appears to collapse a wave when observing it. He argues that when a wave of possibilities collapses ALL the possibilities manifest but each one in a different universe. The apparent single outcome observed is not the product of the observation but a random collapse associated with many outcomes of which only one is manifest in this universe. Thus, the apparent role of consciousness in wave collapse is an illusion.

It would appear that the primacy of consciousness is a simpler explanation than an infinite number of universes. Could there really be a universe where my wife decided, a few months ago, to buy a blue Hyundai and another where she decided to buy a red Hyundai? Perhaps, but the infinite possibilities this implies is mind boggling. Finally, as clever as Deutsch's hypothesis is it seems to me that one

could argue that the so called "random" collapse into multiple outcomes in multiple universes can still be attributed to observation since I know of no reported instances when observation isn't associated with collapse. If the collapse was truly random, wouldn't there be times when observation wasn't accompanied by collapse? In any event, Deutsch's explanation doesn't seem to provide an accounting for psi phenomena.

There is another conception offered by the late David Bohm who proposed a reformulation of quantum theory. Bohm's reformulation subsumes both top down causation and bottom up causation. To keep it simple, Bohm proposes an implicate order existing in the quantum field and an explicate order existing in the material world, which is an extension of the quantum field. The implicate order provides formative causation or top down causation by unfolding its forms into the explicate order. The explicate order provides feedback by enfolding information back into the implicate order potentially modifying the form or bottom up causation. Consciousness and matter form an interacting unit or loop. I suppose consciousness is still primary over matter in this model but it offers a causative role for both. It seems clear that under this model an explanation for psi is also a possibility (for more on this model see *Bohm's Transcendental Physics* on the Spirit page of <http://www.davidcenter.com>).

Regardless of the view taken, we are left with the mystery of mysteries -- the *origination* of matter or consciousness, which remains unanswered and perhaps is unanswerable. A question before which the human mind stands in awe. To quote the late Albert Einstein, "*The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical...without it [one] is as good as dead.*"

I invite you to take an open-minded look at the evidence for psi for yourself and consider the implications of these phenomena for the assumption of the primacy of matter or of consciousness. I can think of no better places to start than with:

[The Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth of Psychic Phenomena](#)

by Dean Radin, PhD

[The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together](#) by Charles Tart, PhD

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