

## Consciousness, or the Ubiquity of Trance<sup>1</sup>



One year when I was away at college (mid-1960s) I was really up against it. I'd been hitchhiking back and forth from the campus in Northern New England to Boston every autumn weekend trying, unsuccessfully, to resuscitate a romance, and had fallen behind in my work. Christmas break was approaching but I had exams to get through before I could take off—hit the interstate one more time with thumb outstretched—and head home—home, a place that, in those years, still held, for me, the delusional promise of reunion, restoration and hearth.

Impulsively, I decided to write a postcard to myself *as the person I knew I would be* when I would already have returned home and be receiving the very card I was to write. I instinctively knew that I was a very different person in Boston than I was as a grimly determined student caught in the isolation of a frozen, rural, fraternity-ridden, alcohol-soaked campus.

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1) This chapter, and the one to follow, are adapted from chapters 1 and 2 in *Pathfinding Through Multiple Personality: Personal Reflections and Cumulative Perspectives on Trance, Dissociation, Treatment of Multiple Personality and Related Topics*, Doctoral Dissertation of Stephen Rich Merriman (Columbia Pacific University, San Rafael, CA, 1996.)

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And so I wrote, imagining myself as the person to whom I was writing, and anticipating *his* joy at being the recipient of this card even as I wrote it. I congratulated the “Boston Stephen” for having made it through finals on the heels of a heart-broken fall.

I sent the card. A part of me, I knew, was already, through the night, traveling 220 miles southwards in the “H.P.O.” (highway post-office vehicle)—already, in my mind’s eye, making the transition to home and, I hoped, warmer climes. And then, steeling myself to endure, I took a break from my studies and set out alone into the cold night. I walked along some railroad tracks for several miles and then, restored through an elemental connection, returned to my work.

Some number of days later I was told that I had received a card in the mail, and it was then handed to me. I smiled. I mentally reached back to embrace that poor, yet determined, melancholic soul who had written me. We, I knew, shared an earnest, soulful joke of sorts, and a chuckle, and there was love and correspondence and mirth between us.



Where is trance?... Everywhere. As considered from a certain perspective, there doesn't appear to be any state of consciousness that does not constitute a form of trance. At any given time some particular state of consciousness may be designated as a non-trance state, based on some consensual agreement

as to what constitutes being “conscious” (as in for instance: “Real” consciousness is alert, while trance is sleep-like.). However, the so-called “non-trance,” “real” consciousness state is often the very state of consciousness from within which the judgment about what constitutes non-trance is being formed! Indeed, the designation of what is genuine consciousness and what’s merely trance is, I’m increasingly convinced, one of convenience only—and may, indeed, be nothing other than arbitrary—though admittedly not without utility.

Why this lead-off plunge into the notion that trance is everywhere? Well, there’s really no insistence here that you take this to be so. However, I do encourage you to reflect upon the notion.

So here are some notions: Every time any of us goes through an entrance of any description—into a room, a courtyard, a museum, our place of work, a church, temple or mosque, a nightclub, a nature setting—into *any* environment—we are quite literally “en-tranced”—brought through an induction in which we are affected, even entrained, by the environment into which we are entering. Our state of consciousness undergoes an alteration or adjustment as it responds to the change—a change in consciousness, or, to put it differently, a change in the quality of trance in which we’ve been functioning.

This phenomenon takes on additional relevance when we enter—make an en-trance—into the interpersonal arena, for our own consciousness is

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affected not only by our entering a different environment physically, but also by the entrance into our own customary environment of *any* change or alteration, including, of course, the entrance of another person, as well as our entrance into any environment inclusive of a group of people.

Induction is a generic concept used, first and foremost, to describe the introduction of an electric current (alternating, or household current, in this example) and voltage into a coil of wire brought into proximity with another coil of wire in which voltage already exists and current is flowing. The coils in proximity are called, collectively, a transformer. As the current-carrying coil is brought into proximity with the non-current-carrying coil, the electromagnetic field of the first coil (the “primary”) induces (“induction”) a current in the coil of the second coil (the “secondary”) and voltage can be measured there, despite the fact that there is no hard-wired connection between them.

Our little basic electricity induction analogy does not end here, however. As the second, originally non-energized coil of wire begins to be energized by the force field of the original coil, the current flow of the primary coil is also affected. It “comes under load,” meaning that its own current flow becomes shaped by the presence of the second coil. One way of envisioning this is that once the second coil has commenced having its own current flow via proximity to the primary coil’s electromagnetic field, the secondary coil’s own current flow instantaneously generates its *own* electromagnetic

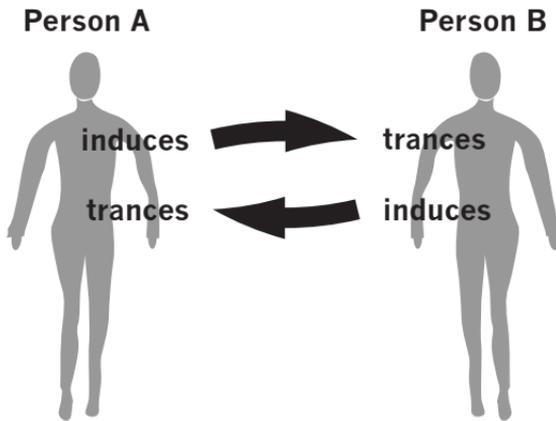
field which extends out from the secondary coil and, in turn, affects the current flow in the primary coil, hence, “bringing it under load,” or “loading it down”—influencing it.

This is the induction of basic electricity. What does it have to suggest to us, by way of analogy, about the pervasiveness of trance and induction as ineluctable qualities of life and consciousness? Most importantly, the fact that *induction, and therefore the alteration of any state of consciousness (trance state) is always a mutual or bi-directional process.* The current appearing in the secondary is a profound change via the presence of the current in the primary, and the resultant load-effect back upon the primary is, in its own way, as profound a change in the current pattern of the primary as is the inducement of current in the secondary.

Could it be that in the arena of interpersonal relations, specifically regarding any two interacting individuals, the force-field of trance in one person is always accompanied by an induced trance (altered) state in another person, who then proceeds, in turn, to induce trance in the first person, and on and on? We might term the overall effect, which is so instantly bi-directional and multilayered, as “co-trance.” Considerable attention, within traditional hypnosis, is usually given to the unidirectional influence of one person’s imposition upon another person’s consciousness, but not much attention is rendered the complete interaction, in which both individuals’ states of consciousness are altered.

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The overall current loop constitutes a bi-directional linkage replete with feedback:



Inductions can happen to us without our being aware of them. *In fact, most inductions are of this sort.* They involve subtle changes—and sometimes not so subtle changes—in consciousness or trance that incessantly encroach upon the assumed observational resiliency of ego-consciousness. Our ego-consciousness—our “I-ness”—can’t track them, nor do we, in ego form, necessarily even attempt to do so, being, instead, generally much taken with (and taken in by) our own unquestioned assumptions about the cinder-block solidness of our observations, and the firmness and stability of our own vantage point in making our observations.

Notwithstanding any such assumptions, in engaging in any interpersonal contact, no matter how polite, discrete or at-a-remove such an exchange may

appear, all interactions occur within a context of layers of pre-existing and simultaneously arising co-trance and mutual induction as givens to relating—and these, which rise up spontaneously and unbidden at every turn, are not generally under any conscious scrutiny by either of the individuals involved. As already mentioned, the respective ego-consciousnesses of the interacting individuals are simply not in a self-observation trance monitoring state-shifts at all. Rather, their respective ego consciousnesses are operating, all the while, within their own discrete, separate trances, implicitly labeled (under the heading of) “stable objectivity.”

The malleability of the consciousness between two relating individuals—the comings and goings of spells and trances on every side via co-trance—even as each person proceeds along under an encapsulating spell of supposed local objectivity, is one of the most important features in all of human interdynamics.

To truly recognize the impermanence, the transiency and the inconsistency of any apparently stable thought-frame of objectivity within oneself and about oneself is the beginning of true wisdom in what we might designate as the field of “consciousness relativity.”

Another aspect of the pervasiveness of trance that bears mentioning is that *any state of consciousness*—discrete gestalt of consciousness—*while operative, carries within itself its own assumption that it constitutes the resident, presiding state of non-trance*—i.e.,

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the genuine article of stable awareness—and *that every other state of consciousness, other than itself, is to be regarded as a “trance” or “altered” state.* I hinted at this characteristic of consciousness in the brief vignette that opened this essay. Indeed, this assumption seems to be an inherent feature of consciousness itself, and constitutes a further reason why the tracking of shifts of consciousness or trance states within oneself is so difficult. Such “changes of mood” can be tolerated under the operative assumption that the stable “I” presides, somehow, over the whole melange of mood and mentation. “Changes in mood” become harder to fathom if customary ego-consciousness has to begin to take *into itself* the consideration that such a trance shift involves not only a quality subordinate to itself, but also, *the supraordinate principle of organization governing its very awareness—ego consciousness—*and therefore its own capacity to track consciousness! “If I’m trying to get to know myself (track my own states of consciousness), then I’m trying to get to know the person who’s trying to get to know me (trying to get to know the person who’s trying to track my own states of consciousness)” is a statement—a kind of mind-tease—that points to this dilemma.

This habitual assumption by our resident state of awareness consciousness—our “I”-ness—by *each* of us—that we (each of us individually in ego-form) constitute a non-trance state or condition, leads readily to some very unhelpful interactions in the realm of our relating with other people.

First, and most troublesome, is the almost automatic, unreflecting assumption—an unquestioned assertion, really—that any other person with whom we interact is a singularity, when, at the outset, the only singular fact about a person we can bank on is the existence of one body. We reflexively impose and stencil our concept of unitary consciousness, as we assume it exists within us, onto other people because of the personal convenience it affords us in so doing. This is born of the unexamined assumption either that pluralistic consciousness does not exist or that, even if it does, then at some level all constituent elements, or consciousnesses, within a person must “really know what’s going on” as part of an overarching singularity. This is a polite, fraudulent fiction.

We also make similar, unhelpful errors in implicitly deciding, right out of a vacuum, to anoint whatever side of a person we first meet and get to know as the organizing principle of that person, simply because *that* manifestation of the person’s personhood is the one we just happen to encounter (and, often, get taken in by!) at the outset.

Our insistence in dealing with a person as if that person, in essence, functions as a unitary singularity can have pernicious consequences. Other sides of a person and their relevance to an emergent, evolving, more comprehensive experience of that person are not given their due. This exclusion inevitably leads to a woefully deficient and impoverished experience of another, in which her/his richness

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and variability are simply not taken into account. A person becomes pigeonholed—and locked by our own expectations—into a one-dimensional mold, and we miss the whole show of discovering the multi-dimensional richness within that person (*Every* person has, and is, this.).

Another aspect of the pervasiveness of trance that is well worth noting involves state-dependent learning and recollection. With the procession of trance states—our shifting consciousness—in which we are each daily immersed, come experiences that are specific to each discrete state of trance.

As a typical (so far as I can tell) human services practitioner with an unexceptional range of activities, I am daily deluged by innumerable details and nuances spread across the range of interpersonal interactions that cross my path during any batch of hours. Although I usually keep notes of various encounters, the actual capacity to record and preserve the minutiae—even the important minutiae—of various meetings and exchanges is lacking, and even if such a recording task were to be done, I would never have the time to retrieve and review the data and detail stored about each person I encounter.

What I noticed some years ago (long before I had recognized the realities of co-trance and pluralistic consciousness) is that when in the presence of each person (read: with my sequencing into the induction—the wakeful trance ambient for each person), the detail, the nuance, the minutiae, the

“experiential recollection”—*all* would be there for me to draw on. Personal information involving those with whom I would interact was stored within me in a trance-specific way, encoded within the overall state of consciousness I would carry respective to each person. Nor would I be able, necessarily, to recall other than the broad outlines of detail or circumstance once a consultation was concluded, and co-trance was no longer operative regarding a specific person. All of this alteration of consciousness/trance was virtually automatic, and certainly operative during years of professional work long before I ever became aware of it.

I also discovered during this period that while learning that was acquired within a given state of trance could be carried over to a subsequent state of consciousness, the translation *always* involved effort, and something of the “experiential completeness” of the interactions encountered while in the prior state of consciousness—within the trance state resident to the experience (the trance state in which the encounter with the person took place)—was *always* lost in translation.

Easier, in a way, to have an experience in a trance-specific state, establish a minimalistic “table of contents” file (so to speak) in a subsequent state of consciousness which would reference the earlier trance-specific experience, and then be able to *return* to the trance state specific to the experience once again

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(as needed) to work with the details and material of the experience.

One straightforward example of the efficiency of (1) learning, or acquiring, information within one specific state of consciousness, (2) simultaneously storing, or filing that information within the *same* state of consciousness, (3) referencing the existence of that state-specific experience in a subsequent state of consciousness, and (4) then returning, at will, to the prior state of consciousness to access, participate in, and use the information (rather than translate the knowledge into a different state of consciousness for storage and retrieval and utilization) is the common situation of the two-car family. Each car drives very differently. The clutches (we drive manual transmission cars), brakes, arrangement of the gearboxes, gear ratios, torque ranges of the engines, road feel, and so on, are markedly different for each car. Yet the kinesthetic gestalt of driving for each car, *once learned* for each one, remains stored within the encoded experience of actually driving each car, and does not have to be relearned.

This is to say that a person climbing into the car s/he drives less often, but “knows” how to drive (having been through the learning curve with that car at some prior time), goes, seamlessly, through an induction and into trance (the state-specific trance of driving that particular car) and, once induced, has instant access to the learned/absorbed gestalt (the kinesthetics) the *feel* of the experience of driving that particular car,

without much hesitance. It's "all" there.

While one could think about it ahead of time—i.e., make a translation of the prior kinesthetic experience of driving the car into cognitions within one's non-driving state of consciousness) about "how the clutch grabs lower in my spouse's car and the brakes pump harder and the shift box is arranged differently"—this would be a very inefficient use of conscious resources. Far easier, and efficient, to revisit the trance—the resident (albeit utilitarianly transient) state of consciousness—in which the information (the total experience of driving that specific car) is both stored and available, and then just utilize it.

The notion of state-dependent/trance-specific learning and recollection as an important subset of the ubiquity of trance is an invaluable awareness to carry into all our interactions with other people. While it is probably true that there is a range of pluralistic consciousness in which the procession of trances and attendant states of consciousness proceeds under the confines of a more or less stable frame of ego-consciousness—of "I"-ness—it is humbling to have to acknowledge that the illusoriness of the actual constancy of our ability to attend, and the shakiness of the faith we may take for granted as to the validity of the cognitions and constancy of our attending consciousness, apply just as much to us as it does to those with whom we would interact. Our implicit, habitual, reflexive assumptions about humankind—that we are all, at heart, unitary and cohesive, need to give

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way to a more encompassing assessment of just how pluralistic and “trancy” human life and consciousness really are—every day and in every wakeful moment!

Some caveats for reflection that I have found helpful:

(1) Don't assume that any state of consciousness—no matter how permanent, enduring, immutable, grounded or “real” it may *seem*—is not a trance state (including the state of consciousness you are in at this very moment as you read these words).

(2) Don't assume that any state of consciousness, no matter how ephemeral or transient, won't *feel* just as immanent and permanent as any grounded ego-state (and have a feeling of constancy akin to such a state) *while it is in effect*.

(3) Recognize that the convention of designating some states of consciousness as “trance” states and other states of consciousness as “non-trance” states is arbitrary, though provisionally useful at times.

(4) Try to recognize that co-trance, as an interpersonal dynamic and phenomenon, is ever operative within your relations with others with or without your consent. (Shifts in your consciousness accompany shifts in consciousness in others, and shifts initiating within their consciousness will induce you into trance just as readily as your shifts affect them. This is stated just for the purpose of reemphasizing the bi-directionality of induction.)

(5) Try to be mindful that whatever state of consciousness or trance is present within you will tend

to don the mantle of non-trance, presenting itself as “the genuine article”—and that trance states or altered states will therefore be designated as being whatever states of consciousness are *not* currently present.

(6) Become aware of the inductions—the “entrances”—of your everyday world, your absorption into countless different environments throughout the course of a day. (Try to track the inductions a bit—from a mood-state change induced by hearing a certain piece of music, perhaps, to a kinesthetic change in the body during rush-hour driving, to patterns of response and feeling around certain individuals whom you encounter, to awareness of shifting patterns and moods as you move through the micro-environments of your daily life.)

(7) Try to pose the following questions to yourself at least several times during the day: “Is the ‘I’ making such assessments of my daily progression of trance states independent of the equation (an independent variable)? Is it (am I!) such a constant, unaltered observational faculty as I track my trances—my procession of consciousnesses? ... Or am ‘I’ impacted by the very question I pose—even by the very act of posing it, or by the act of observation itself—and affected or changed in some particular?” And then ask yourself these questions: “Is the ‘I’ now posing these questions about my trance states the same ‘I’ who asked these questions earlier in the day? Do I feel like the same ‘I’?”

(8) Reflect on whether there is knowledge within

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you that is state-specific/trance-specific — i.e., bases of information or ranges of thought, feeling or physical capabilities which become available to you as you move into their domain and enter into those states of trance which are resident to them.

*What is man that thou art mindful of him?*

—Psalm 8: The Book of Psalms

*What is it that, of which to be mindful, you yourself must be?*

—Another way of asking the same question