

# **Yes, We Are Zombies, But We Can Become Conscious!**

**Charles T. Tart**

**The Journal of Consciousness Studies**

**Symposium on Todd C. Moody's "Conversations with Zombies"**

*Introduction by Peter Webster*

In seeking to explore the elusive nature of consciousness, philosophers have sometimes resorted to "thought experiments," much as physicists do when thinking about the enigmas of relativity. Todd C. Moody, associate professor in philosophy at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, recently contributed a paper to *The Journal of Consciousness Studies* in which he proposed such a thought experiment. Professor Moody's ideas sparked a lively debate in the on-line discussion forum of the Journal, and led to a published Symposium on the subject of his paper which was entitled, "Conversations with Zombies" . (*JCS*, 1, (2), pp. 196-200, available at <http://www.zynet.co.uk/imprint>)

Moody's thought experiment was an attempt to understand whether, and perhaps how, consciousness might be a phenomenon independent from or non-essential to the processes of the nervous system and associated behavior. Would it be possible that a computer, or some hypothetical being, might have all the behavioral attributes and powers of a conscious human yet lack the self-awareness, and awareness of awareness that we call consciousness? In sum, Moody proposed at least the theoretical and philosophical existence of "zombies," beings behaviorally identical to humans, yet lacking consciousness.

One of the contributors to the Symposium, Charles T. Tart, submitted a short commentary inspired by ideas often expressed in Sufism, Zen, or other Eastern philosophies: that most human beings are, most of the time, not at all fully conscious, and require techniques such as meditation to awaken them from that functional but often profoundly unsatisfying state of normal everyday awareness. Professor Tart has written extensively on such subjects as meditation, hypnosis, dreams, and the use of psychedelics in the production of *Altered States of Consciousness*, (the title of one of his books). His contribution to The Journal of Consciousness Studies Symposium is reproduced here with the permission of the publisher, Keith Sutherland (Imprint Academic).

**Journal of Consciousness Studies, 2 (4), 1995, pp. 361-5**

**YES, WE ARE ZOMBIES, BUT WE CAN BECOME CONSCIOUS!**

**Observations on Moody's 'Conversations with Zombies'**

Charles T. Tart  
Institute of Transpersonal Psychology  
744 San Antonio Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303, USA.  
E-mail: [cttart@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cttart@ucdavis.edu)

Moody (1994) ends his provocative article on 'Conversations with zombies' by raising the possibility that 'We might, after all, be zombies'. By zombies he means

creatures who appear to act intelligently, like us, but who have no internal experience of consciousness. My basic point in this brief commentary will be to note as a basic observation that we are indeed, as a matter of verifiable fact, like zombies most of the time *but* we have a possibility of becoming conscious. The consequences of this observable and testable reality are of enormous importance for the development of a fuller understanding of consciousness and its possibilities.

The approach I take here is empirical and scientific, rather than philosophical. By 'science' I mean an approach to understanding *all* of reality that puts absolute and primary emphasis on observables, whether these observables are external or internal to the observer, and secondary emphasis on conceptual understanding. That is, creating an elegant and logical understanding of something, a theory, is fine, but if that understanding does not account for *all* of the relevant observations, both postdictively and predictively, that's too bad for the theory, not the observations. My understanding of scientific method, and some important aspects of its application to the investigation of altered states of consciousness, has been described in detail elsewhere (Tart, 1972). This approach is hardly unique to me: except for the observation of how many 'scientists' there seem to be who subvert or refuse to look at data which does not accord with their theoretical convictions, I had always thought this was the generally agreed-upon definition of what constituted science.

To illustrate this primacy of observation: at the beginning of my career, as a graduate student, I began extensive research on the effects of post-hypnotic suggestions on nocturnal dreaming (Tart, 1962; 1963). In the course of reviewing the literature, I came across a monograph by a philosopher (Malcolm, 1959) which logically and conclusively proved that there were no such things as dreams: I had nightmares about it all that night! Since then I have come to realize that one can probably build a convincing and 'logical' case for almost anything, especially if the conclusions appeal to one's hidden prejudices. Thus I seldom pay much attention to arguments about consciousness unless they work intimately and usefully with the *full* range of relevant observables.

## Zombies

Moody notes that

Zombies are, in relation to us, in the same predicament that most of us are in relation to those mystics who report back to us their experiences of what is sometimes called superconsciousness. We can ape what they say if we want to, but we don't really know what we are talking about. This difficulty is sometimes referred to in the mystical literature as 'ineffability', but the mystics understand each other, just as human non-zombies do. (p. 200.)

I would describe myself as an empiricist and scientist and a very practical person, not the kind of person we popularly associate with the term 'mystic'. I do not feel I am in some special relation to a Higher Power or God, am not subject to sudden states of ecstasy, and do not have any special, 'holy' doctrine to defend. But as a result of more than 30 years of observations, both external and internal, I would like to report that:

- Ordinary, 'normal' consciousness is indeed a zombie-like state of greatly constricted and distorted, if not absent, 'consciousness'. I have given such ordinary consciousness the technical name of 'consensus consciousness' in the purely descriptive sense and 'consensus trance' when focusing on it as a restricted state (Tart, 1975, 1986, 1994).

- I know from personal experience that there is a transient and perhaps permanent 'awakening' from consensus trance/consciousness, a clarification or lucidity, that is rewarding and adaptive in itself, as well as vividly illustrating the zombie-like qualities of ordinary consciousness. Although it is hard to describe this condition or state (it's more process than concrete state), for this paper we will refer to it as the 'expanded consciousness state'. The term Moody used, 'superconsciousness', is too grandiose for the experiences I speak of from direct knowledge. Such experiences also exist, but need not concern us in this paper.

- People in this expanded consciousness state or process seem indeed to understand each other fairly well, even though what they communicate may sometimes seem ineffable to those in ordinary, zombie-like consciousness.

Here I must make a vital point: the above three observations are of quite limited value and possibly misleading if one only thinks about them. But they can be understood and verified through training and experience. Such experiential understanding need not be limited to strange and unusual people, such as the connotations of terms like 'mystics' bear.

To illustrate: In the early 1970s, I took a number of classes on meditation from a Tibetan lama, Tarthang Tulku, living in Berkeley. One of the practice instructions he frequently referred to was to look for the 'space between thoughts'. I found the concept of the space between thoughts fascinating. For one thing, it was of great theoretical significance if thoughts were discrete entities with a gap between them, rather than continuous, as I had previously experienced them. It also made sense that if one could find such a space, it could produce a sort of liberation from the tyranny that thoughts often produced as they captured one's attention. I had many interesting and exciting thoughts during my attempts at meditation about what this space between thoughts would be like and its possibilities.

But I never *experienced* any gap or space between my thoughts.

I have always tried to be as honest as possible with myself, as well as with others, as both an essential part of my scientific activity and as a guideline for living. Eventually I had to admit to myself that I was fascinated by the *concept* of a space between thoughts but that, for all practical purposes, there was no observable space between *my* thoughts. While I had fantasies about what such an experience would be like, I had no real knowledge of it at all.

## Expanded Consciousness State

Twenty years later I can report that I have now experienced the space between thoughts many times, that I can often produce and prolong that expanded consciousness state, to various degrees, at will, and that from within that kind of 'spaciousness', it is clear that my ordinary consciousness, where I live 99+% of my life, is indeed zombie-like. Yet in this state of zombie consciousness, which is 'normal' for our civilization, I am generally considered an intelligent, articulate and successful person. I am, in not quite the way I believe he intended it, a living illustration of Moody's point about zombies, viz. 'They engage in complex behaviours, very similar to ours, but these behaviours are not accompanied by conscious experience of any sort.' These behaviours can, unfortunately, include talking and writing about 'awakening' and 'higher consciousness', i.e. actually being in this more conscious state is a quite distinct thing from conceptualizing about it. That is, it is easier to have fantasies about being in a state of expanded consciousness rather than actually living it.

To be more precise, I am ordinarily conscious in consensus trance by normal, social standards of consciousness: internal experiences accompany most of my behaviour, often including the intellectual knowledge that I am having specific sorts of experiences—what we usually call self-consciousness. I think, I plan, I remember, I experience sensations, I experience pleasure and pain, hope and fear. So I am not a zombie in Moody's particular use of the term. But from the perspective of the (usually fleeting but sometimes longer) state of the gap between thoughts, of 'awakening' in Gurdjieff's sense (Ouspensky, 1949; Tart, 1986, 1994), my ordinary state of consciousness is zombie-like in the general pejorative sense of the term. These zombie qualities include: (a) a greatly reduced sense of aliveness and vitality; (b) a great narrowing of perspective and perception; (c) a consuming psychological identification with some small subset of my full potential; (d) reduced intelligence stemming from this narrow perspective and identification; and (e) a selfishness, a self-centredness as compared to a more open and compassionate attention to the rest of reality.

### **The Dream Analogy**

To try to further communicate some of the differences between the more 'awakened' state and ordinary consciousness, let me use the traditional analogy drawn in Eastern enlightenment traditions between nocturnal dreaming and ordinary waking.

During a dream, we almost always take what is happening as real. We are a real self having experiences within a real world. When the dream situation is pleasant, fine, when it is unpleasant, we suffer. When we wake up to ordinary waking consciousness, however, we realize that the dream state was a quite inferior state of consciousness in that (a) we did not know our true condition, viz. dreaming; (b) we were not our usual 'real' self; (c) capacities we take for granted in the waking state, such as ability to reason and draw up relevant memories and skills were absent or distorted; and (d) our dream suffering and problems were pseudo-suffering and pseudo-problems, and were cured not on their own terms but by waking up to our real identity and situation in the waking world.

Similarly, in moments or periods of that 'space between thoughts' or expanded consciousness, I feel that I have been unconscious (a) of my true condition (lost in the limited) and of (b) my real identity (a non-verbalizable, non-concrete sense of

openness and process, rather than thingness); (c) deprived of a clear perception and straightforward responsiveness to the world; and (d) often suffering over 'problems' that were not real, that only existed by virtue of my constricted mental condition.

### **Observational Status of these Points**

I shall make no attempt to argue or reason in support of the above statements. Part of the understanding I have come to in my three decades of research on consciousness is that reasoning and logic (following rules, given a priori assumptions), while very useful in a multitude of ways, are only a *part* of the totality of conscious functioning and this part cannot reduce the whole of consciousness to its terms. So, in the spirit of science, the above are offered as observations that the reader can potentially validate for herself if she is interested in doing so. Space limitations here do not allow discussions of methods, but the literature of the slowly growing field of transpersonal psychology has many such discussions, as does the traditional mystical literature. The methods that have worked well for me are described in two books (Tart, 1986, 1994). I have also found these methods for enhancing mindfulness in everyday life quite teachable to selected graduate students. Excellent introductions to mindfulness meditation, an important aspect of method, are (Goldstein, 1987, 1994; Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; 1994; Kornfield, 1993; LeShan, 1975; Salzberg, 1995).

### **Will our Study of Consciousness go beyond Consciousness<sup>z</sup>?**

In his final paragraph, Moody speculates:

Consider the possibility that a few zombies might discover a discipline that, after considerable practice, turns them into non-zombies like us. It would presumably be difficult to convince other zombies that such a discipline has any point, and it would be quite easy for the zombies to dismiss the phenomenon as marginal or pathological. The zombie scenario does not prove the 'validity' of mystical experience, whatever that might mean, but it does entail that such experience cannot be dismissed on the grounds of its radical unfamiliarity to the rest of us. We might, after all, be zombies. (p. 200.)

The interested reader is invited to experiment with 'awakening', with finding the spaciousness between thoughts (not to be confused with a suppression of thought or simple blankness) that gives a much wider scope to our understanding of consciousness. I believe everyone has had at least fleeting moments of expanded consciousness, even if largely forgotten in the hectic rush of zombie life<sup>z</sup>, and this commentary is to remind you of them and their importance. If we do not develop this wider perspective, we shall, in Moody's terms, just have our zombie science of consciousness<sup>z</sup>, thought<sup>z</sup>, feeling<sup>z</sup>, hope<sup>z</sup>, fear<sup>z</sup>, life<sup>z</sup> and death<sup>z</sup>. Speaking from my occasional experiences of expanded consciousness, that would be sad indeed.

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Keith Sutherland  
JKB SUTHERLAND, PUBLISHER  
JOURNAL OF CONSCIOUSNESS STUDIES  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT  
IMPRINT ACADEMIC, PO BOX 1, THORVERTON EX5 5YX, UK  
TEL: +44 (0)1392 841600. Fax: 841478. EMAIL: keith@imprint.co.uk  
WWW: <http://www.zynet.co.uk/imprint>