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## *BOOK REVIEW*

**Memoir of a Trance Therapist: Hypnosis and the Evocation of Human Potentials** by Adam Crabtree. Friesen Press, 2014. 189 pp. $24.99. ISBN 978-1-4602-5515-5 (hardcover), 978-1-4602-5516-2 (paperback), 978-1-4602-5516-2 (eBook).

Dr. Crabtree's *Memoir of a Trance Therapist* is not a memoir per se, but an explication of his theoretical explorations over the years. It begins with his theory of hypnosis, how it evolved and its implications. He argues that an understanding of hypnosis is yet to be achieved by present-day researchers and theorists. His story is personal and human, letting us know how and why his thinking has developed as it has. He concludes that trance is the experiential foundation for all experience. This conclusion seeds his exploration of other human phenomena—how humans evolve and develop extraordinary abilities, how groups and culture influence individuals, and how individuals can intuit non-sensory knowledge and display paranormal abilities. He provides a historical, philosophical analysis of the human potential movement. To my surprise it began with Schopenhauer. Finally, relying on the philosophy of Charles Sanders Pierce, he argues that we are all immersed in evolutionary love, a universal process that leads us, our actions, and our world closer to perfection or God. I found it engaging for the most part, thought-provoking in the main, but lacking rigor. Some of what he proposes takes courage to state professionally and publicly, for example discussing clairvoyance, knowing outside the senses, and influencing events.

Dr. Crabtree was a Benedictine monk and Catholic priest, studied philosophy at the University of Toronto, went on to earn a doctorate, and has been a practicing clinician ever since. Over the years he has become a well-known scholar and written books about dissociation, hypnosis, and the history of hypnosis. He has been a participant and leader in the human potential movement, centered at Esalen, Big Sur, California. It is clear that his background as a monk, psychotherapist, philosopher, hypnotherapist, and historian and scholar all come to bear in this interesting and thought-provoking book.

Yet, in spite of his impressive credentials, I question some of his conclusions. Even though I frequently disagree with him, he engages me and stimulates my thinking and creativity. And, despite these questions,

they have led me to seriously consider the issues he raises. In this review, I hope to detail some of those questions in the hopes that they will stimulate a revision.

The first and most critical issue has to do with "trance," the theoretical term he uses to designate the state of hypnosis. What is most interesting about his choice of this term is his bypassing the mind–body problem. The solution in psychological and behavioral science is to define a mental phenomenon in terms of its measures. Dr. Crabtree never addresses this issue—an issue of which he must be well aware. From a philosophical perspective, he is resting his whole theory on a specific mental state called "trance." The elegance of this term is its historical and current use. "We" all seem to know what that is and this makes communicating about it easy. As well, given its historical usage, its meaning should have some important role in understanding hypnosis.

What seems problematic to me in Dr. Crabtree's approach is how he defines "trance" and then asserts that it is the basic experiential structure for all human experience. This is particularly important for his theory since it is the foundation on which he builds all of his later conclusions. If this seminal idea has no foundation, then it undermines what follows.

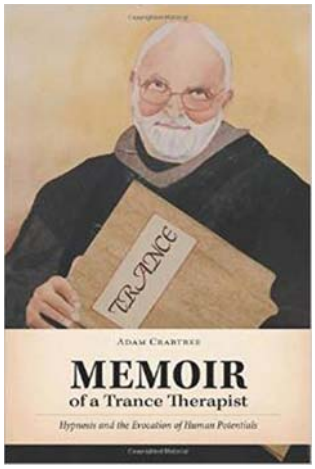
Dr. Crabtree's explanation rests on what he considers to happen during hypnosis: The subject focuses on an object (inside or outside) and the fringe disappears. The more intense the focus, the deeper the trance. Whenever there is focus, there is trance. Since all experience, even the everyday, involves focus, we are, according to the author, always in a trance, though he emphasizes not necessarily a hypnotic trance.

As I have tried to understand why he theorized in this way, it seems to me that he is attempting to show that hypnosis is not discrete from normal experience. Since that is the case, he might argue, there must be a reasonable connection between trance and everyday experience. In fact, he writes that all trance phenomena can happen when a person is not in trance—a fact with which I concur. As a result, he puts trance on a continuum as a function of the intensity of focus on an object—the more exclusive, the more hypnotic. As a result, he now can explain why extraordinary hypnotic experiences (amnesia, hallucinations, self-healing) can also occur during everyday experiences. His theory, therefore, considers all hypnotic phenomena while also explaining how those occur in normal "waking" states.

I would point out, however, that human experience is not always continuous. Sleep and dreaming, for example, are discrete states that are different from everyday, waking experience. I make this observation to point out that hypnosis, as a state of mind, could reasonably be considered discrete from everyday experience, and, as a result, does not need to be

placed on a continuum with it. To continue this line of thought, Dr. Crabtree even refers to hypnosis as a kind of sleep. On the other hand, to critique what I just wrote, such an observation does not consider light "trance", which is close to everyday experience. Clearly, the author is struggling with a complex and confounding mass of facts about hypnosis and attempting to integrate them under a single conceptual umbrella. This is a worthy endeavor, but I think his solution fails.

I detailed elsewhere (Beere 2012) some of my rationale for why "trance," as defined by Crabtree, is not a viable construct to explain hypnotic phenomena. From my perspective, his *Memoir* clarifies in large measure why he has done this and how he applies it conceptually. Many readers might find his thinking useful, instructive, and thought-provoking. On the other hand, there seem to be some additional complications. And if those complications find support, then they undermine the validity of the theory. According to Dr. Crabtree, trance is the result of intense focus. In my clinical experience, individuals who are very logical and focused intently on the hypnotic procedure are difficult to hypnotize. In other words, their intense focus interferes with trance. From a different point of view, my experience of working with a hypnotized client does not involve their having an intense focus. Rather, the client needs to be able to follow my lead, my suggestions, which shift their focus—listening to my voice, noticing their breath, discovering relaxation slowly beginning somewhere, awareness of thinking . . . and so on. The client's awareness is not tightly focused but being led by me and shifting from "object to object." My understanding of what happens with a client does not entail an intense focus but rather an easily led focus that is open to suggestion. This is not an intense but an absorbed focus. Adding yet another difficulty with intense focus on an object, my clinical experience has demonstrated that problem-solving, or, using Dr. Crabtree's terminology, the elicitation of subliminal resources, occurs in states of inner receptivity or openness, not in intense focus. I would argue as well that intense focus interferes with the client's ability to allow, to know, or to activate these subliminal resources. My final difficulty with intense focus has to do with the inherent limitations most individuals have in their everyday lives. If, as Dr. Crabtree asserts, intense focus automatically elicits subliminal resources linked to the object of focus, everyone should be spontaneously accessing what they need in order to change, and, as a result, changing or getting better. They do not. In fact, this is exactly why individuals go to therapy. Furthermore, if individuals responded as Dr. Crabtree suggests, hypnosis should never be needed. Simply focusing intently on any problem should automatically evoke the subliminal resources required. And individuals should spontaneously change all the




time. I believe Dr. Crabtree's theory cannot explain these situations and, thus, needs to be revised.

Continuing my critique, Dr. Crabtree ignores two other spheres of human experience in which hypnosis-like phenomena can occur: meditation and dissociation. What is unique about these two different experiences is the circumstances evoking them. Meditation is generated solely by the individual. Dissociation occurs spontaneously, often in terrorizing circumstances. Hypnosis results from the actions of a hypnotist. What, one may ask, is the commonality cutting across all these experiences? I have no answer to this question but I would assert it is not an intense focus on an object. In this regard, consider meditation.

There is a spectrum of meditative practices ranging from intense focus on a single object to remaining aware of how attention shifts, moment to moment, from object to object. There is, as well, analytical meditation, which requires the meditator to continually analyze, in the same fashion, what arises in mind or what arises as the result of the prior analysis. The variety of these practices does not match the intense focus on an object, though it might involve maintaining a particular kind of attention or awareness.

I developed a theory of dissociation (Beere 1995) based on what happens perceptually during dissociation, namely that the perceptual background is blocked out. The background comprises perceptual constants: "I," mind, body, world, and time. The specific dissociative experience is linked to what aspect of the background is blocked out. A summary of the empirical research to support the theory can be found in Beere (2009). Clearly, my term "background" is almost identical to what Crabtree calls "the fringe." As well, my theory posits that the background is blocked out when perception focuses narrowly and exclusively on something. I have conjectured, as well, that there is a not-yet-determined connection between dissociation and hypnosis. My theory of dissociation uses some of the same concepts that Dr. Crabtree uses in his theory of hypnosis. Why then do I disagree with what he proposes?

From my perspective, loss of background is an extreme and unusual occurrence. The object of focus must be of determining significance, for example life-threatening. It is only under these circumstances that dissociation occurs. To rephrase this observation, loss of background does

not occur during the everyday focusing of attention, even if that is intense and undistracted such as during the creation of a wooden bed. In doing the wood work, thinking about the project and so on, the background remains intact, framing, in a larger context, the construction of the bed. To actually block out the background (or, using Dr. Crabtree's term, fringe) requires a situation of powerful significance that "pulls" attention to focus exclusively on it.

I would like now to address "subliminal resources," which, according to Crabtree, lead to and explain all hypnotic phenomena.

> . . . . Trances automatically evoke in the entranced person hidden resources appropriate to the object of focus of the trance. This evocation is, in my view, infallible—it always occurs when we engage with the world. (p. 111)

From my point of view, Dr. Crabtree is correct that trance makes previously unavailable inner resources available. However, the clinical evidence I have seen does not convince me those resources are "automatically evoked." More pointedly, during hypnotherapy, once a life problem is brought to the client's attention, spontaneous solutions and change do not occur. It is only after suggestions are made by the hypnotherapist that change begins to occur. What is notable here is the necessity of the hypnotherapist to help evoke those resources—resources, I would note, always available to the client but not previously accessed. As a consequence of these observations, I find problematic Dr. Crabtree's thinking about how subliminal resources are elicited.

There is an intriguing chapter on "Asking" that addresses the difficulties I have detailed in the previous paragraph. He discusses the Hawaiian Huna system via an interview with someone who uses this approach. The system explains how to access not only inner resources but also to engage a response from the universe. This is something I have attempted to understand in my own life, given that I have had numerous such experiences. I explored this in another publication (Beere 1997). Dr. Crabtree does not directly connect this chapter on "Asking" with his overriding project of explaining hypnosis. Yet the Huna system provides a method allowing an individual to access information from and have influence beyond the boundaries of the body. From another perspective, however, given Dr. Crabtree's assertions that subliminal resources are automatically evoked when one focuses on an object, there should be no need for the Huna system. I had hoped that Dr. Crabtree would juxtapose his earlier assertions about the automatic evocation of subliminal resources with the process of asking, which yields a result only after certain conditions have been met. This is an unaddressed contradiction in his book.

Dr. Crabtree has a fascinating explanation for why suggestibility is enhanced in trance. He theorizes that the distinction between inside and outside merges in trance—or to put it differently the sense of self is no longer so contained. The hypnotist is incorporated into the sense of self, and thus suggestions are readily experienced as coming from oneself. Even though I am not sure about this, the explanation intrigues me.

I found logical problems in Dr. Crabtree's discussion of group-mind. Here are some quotations.

> . . . people and groups can be considered living persons . . . (p. 71)

> . . . the group-mind influence is also conveyed along another, less obvious, pathway, with a more effective access to the member's inner life: the pathway of unconscious communication. Here the group's inner mind operates directly on the inner mind of the member. (p. 77)

Dr. Crabtree seems to suggest that a group exists as if a living person and has an inner mind. Furthermore, that inner mind communicates with the inner mind of group members. I have taught group dynamics and led many groups so I know what Dr. Crabtree is referring to in terms of group pressure and group-defined patterns of thought, belief, and behavior. I do not discount the phenomena: I question the mechanism he attributes to those group phenomena. To make that phenomenon into an entity equivalent to a human founders logically. How many people does it take to develop a group-mind? Does the group-mind continue to exist when individuals leave the group? Does it communicate to individuals who are physically distant from that group and uninvolved in what is occurring at the time? Does the group-mind persist once the group has dissolved? Where are both the inner mind and the group-mind located? Since group-mind is also "historical," does it extend into the past? Does a past group-mind persist in its existence into the present? Dr. Crabtree does not address these questions. From my point of view, the chapter on group-mind was not supportable. And, now, despite my questions, I need to acknowledge that Dr. Crabtree supported his position about group-mind and culture with his discussion of Charles Sanders Pierce and other philosophers who consider groups and culture to have minds.

Having been a participant in the human potential movement, I found his historical perspective fascinating. I had no awareness that the genesis of these ideas linked back to Schopenhauer, Myers, and others. In the larger context of hypnosis, the belief that we all have untapped and undeveloped potentials fits precisely with his theory. Hypnosis, or "trance," from Dr. Crabtree's point of view, is one such avenue to develop human potential.

He argues further that given his belief that everyday experience is trance, human beings are always having their untapped potentials elicited. This leads to the natural and positive evolution of the human race.

In various sections of the book, Dr. Crabtree overtly states that we can know the thing-in-itself, a reference to Kant, who states that we never have access to it. Also in various places in the book, Dr. Crabtree explores the thinking of post-Kantian philosophers who disagreed with Kant. This supports his assertions of such direct knowing. And, more interestingly, he argues that this knowing does not use the senses. There can be direct intuitive knowing.

Despite my critiques, there is something sweet and optimistic at the heart of this book. Dr. Crabtree deeply believes in the goodness and potential of human beings. He sees the universe as inherently evolving in better and better, ever more loving ways.

This is a book I recommend.

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