

Every believer is also a disbeliever

Peter Lamont on what witches and dead people can tell us about extraordinary beliefs

I believe that witches exist. I believe that mind reading is possible. And I believe that some people have the ability to predict the future. But I do not believe in the paranormal.

This is a problem because, when we measure paranormal belief, we provide people with statements about precisely such things as the existence of witches, the possibility of mind reading and the ability of some people to predict the future. The responses to these statements are then taken as indicators of belief in the paranormal. However, they do not necessarily indicate paranormal belief, since one can easily believe in the existence of such things without believing in the paranormal.

After all, witches do exist. I have met several, and have discussed post-punk goth bands with some of them (though I do not believe they have any magical powers). Mind reading is possible, since we can know what others are thinking (we can often tell when others are lying, or fancy us, or want to borrow something). And many people have the ability to predict the future (such as weather presenters, economists, or the makers of railway timetables) though, like astrologers and psychics, they are often wrong.

This may seem like a problem of clarity, but it points to a more fundamental matter. Beliefs in witchcraft, mind reading, and predicting the future are only meaningful for paranormal belief if they refer to things that are not in line with orthodox scientific knowledge. Belief that paranormal phenomena exist is, by definition, belief in phenomena that are outside current scientific knowledge. However, that is not necessarily what it means for those whose beliefs we seek to understand.

After all, there have always been scientists who have claimed that such phenomena are real, and that they are compatible with scientific knowledge. Newton and Boyle believed in miracles. Senior figures in the Royal Society since,

and even recent Nobel Prize winners, have claimed that such phenomena are real, and that they are compatible with scientific knowledge. In recent times at least, these scientific authorities have been in the minority, and their views have not been considered part of orthodox science, but their scientific credentials have nevertheless been influential in swaying opinion. To take just the latest example, internationally respected psychologist Daryl Bem published in 2011, in a major peer-reviewed psychology journal, experimental evidence for the existence of ESP. This has naturally been reported more widely in the popular press. Anyone who has read or heard about this might



reasonably believe that ESP is part of current scientific knowledge.

In addition to 'proper' scientists in 'proper' scientific journals, countless others have appealed to scientific credentials, expertise and knowledge that many scientists might regard as dodgy, but that the public might not realise are not 'proper' after all. It has often been reported in the media that there is scientific evidence in favour of extraordinary things, and that they are compatible with scientific knowledge,

and science has often demonstrated that remarkable things are nevertheless true. In other words, it is far from easy for non-experts (the people whose beliefs are of interest) to know what is compatible with orthodox scientific knowledge. From their point of view, belief in such things is not necessarily belief in things that are contrary to scientific knowledge.

And then there is the question of the 'object of thought': of what are people thinking when they respond to a statement about, say, 'mind reading'? In other words, what is it they believe in? Perhaps they think of someone like Derren Brown, who has often performed as if he can tell what folk are thinking simply by looking into their eyes. If he could really do this, of course, such an ability would properly be termed 'paranormal'. Nevertheless, millions have seen such demonstrations on national television and, countless others have seen live performances of similar feats by lesser 'psychological illusionists'. Many people believe such events are real, but not that they are paranormal, though experts would say that if they were real, then they would be paranormal. So are these people believers in the paranormal or not?

The fact is that we cannot begin to answer this question until we get into rather more detail. In short, if we wish to understand what people believe, then we need to understand rather more about what they believe in, and what they believe about it.

The good news is that there is no shortage of evidence: history is full of detailed accounts in which people express views about extraordinary phenomena. This enormous body of evidence is real-world data, produced by people in everyday settings rather than by participants in an artificially restricted context. It is full of all the messy concerns that people have in the real world, and shows how beliefs about extraordinary phenomena are inextricably bound up with them.

Let us take just one example, which exemplifies any demonstration of psychic ability.

William and Ira Davenport were two American brothers who, in 1864, travelled to Britain and performed a wonderful feat. They sat inside a large 'spirit cabinet', tied to a bench with ropes. The cabinet contained various musical instruments (a tambourine, a bell, and so on), and the doors of the cabinet were closed. Despite the fact that the boys were tied up, mysterious phenomena occurred (the tambourine was heard to shake, the bell was heard to ring, and so on). And when the doors of the cabinet were

opened, the Davenport brothers were still tied up. Since the boys clearly could not have been responsible – after all, they had been tied up with rope – many people came to believe that this was the work of spirits, who had travelled from even further afield to shake the tambourine, ring the bell, and so on.

Those who believed that this was real believed that the boys were not responsible. They believed that the boys could not have been responsible, because they had been tied up with rope. This was not because the idea of escape had not crossed their minds. It was,

of course, the obvious explanation, but the act was designed to be convincing. An audience member tied the boys up, and often someone who knew about knots. A sailor, perhaps, would assure the audience that it was impossible to escape from the knots he had tied. And further convincers were added too: after the boys' hands had been tied behind their backs, salt would be placed into their hands, and after the various phenomena had occurred, the salt was found to be still in their hands. How, people wondered, could the boys possibly have untied the knots, and moved the objects, without dropping some salt? Thus, the idea that the boys might have escaped was considered, but then rejected.

This has always been the case in terms of extraordinary beliefs: belief in extraordinary (or paranormal) phenomena is based on the exclusion of ordinary (or normal) explanations. And one reason for belief is that such demonstrations are explicitly designed by others to exclude ordinary explanations. This, of course, includes every parapsychological experiment that has ever been conducted.

Naturally, many others believed that the spirit manifestations of the Davenports were the result of trickery. They may not have known how the boys managed to escape, but they maintained that this was how it was done. These people were not disbelievers, however, but simply believers in something else, and this is another perennial theme: people do not believe or disbelieve, they believe one thing or another. So-called 'sceptics' are people who believe that all such events have (what they regard as adequate) normal explanations.

The longstanding dispute between those who believe and those who believe the opposite continues to this day. Sceptics point to countless failures, duplications and exposures, and this is

nothing new. For example, the Davenports were sometimes tied up so tightly that the spirits failed to produce any phenomena. Many conjurors duplicated the spirit cabinet demonstration, and without the need for supernatural assistance. And, in private séances, the Davenports were sometimes seen walking about when they were supposed to be tied up in the corner. Countless psychics since have failed in test conditions, have had their phenomena duplicated by trickery, and have been caught in the act of fraud.

According to sceptics, this all illustrates that paranormal phenomena do not exist.

However, for as long as these arguments have been

made, proponents have begged to differ. Thus, spiritualists regularly admitted that mediums failed on certain occasions, but noted that, on other occasions, they succeeded. It was true that conjurors performed similar feats, they conceded, but these stage illusions were not quite the same thing. And even when mediums were caught cheating, this did not mean the phenomena were fake. For example, when Ira Davenport was seen wandering around the room when he was supposed to be tied up in the corner, this was regarded by some spiritualists as evidence of a spirit double (because the real Ira Davenport was still tied up in the corner). Others pointed out that mediums sometimes cheated because they came under the influence of an evil spirit, while even those who accepted that this was a case of conscious fraud noted that it was a sad truth that genuine mediums often resorted to trickery. All of these arguments had been made before, and have been made countless times since.

It is easy to see all this as evidence of gullibility, but that would be to miss the point. Such beliefs can always be maintained in the face of such evidence, because they are based on particular events. One need only believe in one genuine phenomenon to believe that such phenomena are possible. After that, all the fraud in the world has no necessary bearing on the matter, no more than the existence of wigs has on the existence of genuine hair. Or, to put it another way, every believer is also a disbeliever.

So, in what do people believe, and what do they believe about it? This, of course, is a complex matter, but there are some important general patterns that have a bearing on understanding belief. Since

the days of mesmerism, there have been a number of common features, not only in the particularity of the objects of belief, but also in what has been believed about them. For example, James Braid believed in the reality of trance states and insensibility to pain, but not in lucid somnambulism (a form of mesmeric clairvoyance). He believed that the former kind of phenomena were the result of intense concentration, not animal magnetism and, as such, were entirely compatible with science. Later, spiritualists believed that at least some of the phenomena of the séance were the result of the spirits, but countless others believed that such phenomena were genuine, yet declined to believe in the spirits. They took the view that these phenomena were the result of a natural force, which came to be known as 'psychic'. The relationship of this psychic force to orthodox science was another matter that was fiercely disputed, just as mediums and mesmerists had previously disputed the validity of animal magnetism, and many continue to argue about the scientificity of psi. Meanwhile, as was mentioned above, ordinary people can still easily believe that certain phenomena are real without necessarily believing that they are incompatible with science.

In short, for the last two centuries, there have been at least three positions one can take in relation to any extraordinary phenomenon: one can believe that it is real (i.e. it is not due to chance, fraud or an error in observation); one can believe that it is due to a particular process (such as animal magnetism or ESP); and one can believe that such a process is incompatible with orthodox science. Some of these, or all of these, might count as paranormal belief, but history shows that they are not considered to be the same thing. And so, if we wish to understand what people believe, then we need to understand what they believe in, and what they believe about it.

There is, of course, a great deal more that history can tell us about our ongoing beliefs, about what we have gained from expressing them publicly, and about our attempts to understand them. However, as a witch once said to me at the end of a Bauhaus gig, I really must fly.

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