
Book Review: *Critical Reflections on the Paranormal*

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A review of *Critical Reflections on the Paranormal*. Edited by Michael Stoeber and Hugo Meynell. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996. Pp. 224. £15.50 pbk. LC 96-1517. ISBN 0-7914-3064-2.

As with many books that attempt to unite two disciplines (here predominantly: Philosophy and Parapsychology) *Critical Reflections on the Paranormal* has as its immediate problem the definition of its readership. The book consists of nine chapters by nine different authors, the majority of whom are professional philosophers. One might imagine, therefore, that the book would be aimed primarily at philosophers and that the writings would as a consequence be intricate, tightly woven and somewhat heavy as philosophical writings are wont to be. But herein enters the problem. Whereas historical philosophers, philosophers of science, philosophers of mind or continental philosophers may all presuppose a common ground of knowledge and a common vocabulary amongst their proposed readership, those philosophers debating about parapsychology can often not make such assumptions. As a result the ground and the vocabulary has to be laid within the essays themselves. In some ways this has its advantages as it makes the writings accessible to a larger audience – namely to parapsychologists, philosophers and to the intelligent layperson – and in other ways it is frustrating as philosophical depth can be compromised by such an approach as can a properly indepth discussion of parapsychology.

Another problem that enters in – and this is probably true of virtually all academic books – is the scope that any given book can hope to cover. The rather all-embracing title of this book is a little over-ambitious. All of the essays could

probably be lumped into roughly two topics – the appraisal of reasons for the continued controversial nature of parapsychology and the issue of survival. Those hoping for the wider range of discussion suggested by the title of the book will be disappointed.

The book opens with two chapters, one by each of the editors. The individual contributions by the authors are, incidentally, actually termed in the book as chapters. I found this rather counter-intuitive, because although the contributions do interlink, the book is not written as a collective treatise; it is presented more as an invited collection of essays on the given topic. Notes are at the end of each chapter and are not always consistent in form (Donald Evans' paper has endnotes followed by references, all other papers have endnotes which include the references within the notes when needed); this too can be confusing. Although these are only minor irritants, they do give the impression of careless editing..

Michael Stoeber opens the book by deftly summarizing and linking the contents of the individual chapters that are to follow. Although this is a standard way of introducing a collection of papers, it is unfortunate that Stoeber continually refers to psi as 'human powers' thereby pandering to the popular terminology that the book purports to go beyond. It is also made clear in this introduction that 'the paranormal' (and hence the book) goes beyond 'the discipline of parapsychology proper' (p.2). At this point, with the passing mention of angelology, mediumistic communication and possession, the reader may hear

warning bells going off in the distance, particularly when Stoeber follows this by referring to the New Age movement on the one hand and CSICOP on the other. Stoeber then claims that the aim of the book is to examine sweeping statements critically. This juxtaposition, however, thereby gives the impression that the book is primarily concerned with analysing popular conceptions of parapsychology rather than parapsychology proper. Nevertheless, these warning bells are merely a false alarm and they should not deter the reader from reading further.

Hugo Meynell's paper is the first of the following three essays which focus on problems in examining paranormal phenomena. Meynell states that the purpose of his contribution is to consider how one should investigate so-called 'paranormal' phenomena and to examine what relevance these phenomena have to the issue of survival. He distinguishes between scepticism and pseudo-scepticism; pseudo-scepticism being the dismissal of the paranormal a priori.

Meynell argues against pseudo-scepticism and he divides scepticism proper into scepticism-a and scepticism-b. Those in the former category believe that all claims about the paranormal should be assessed in the light of available evidence, whereas those in the latter think that, all evidence considered, there is still insufficient reason to believe in the paranormal. Scepticism-b may follow on from scepticism-a. Meynell claims that too many investigators act as if they are lawyers pleading for the prosecution or defence. He cites Honorton's ganzfeld work and Hyman's criticism of it as an example. Although there is some truth to Meynell's point, the discussion is somewhat brief (he does not mention, for example, that Honorton replied to Hyman's criticisms and that work has since been undertaken taking Hyman's criticisms into account), this brevity unfortunately rendering his point less convincing than it could be. Meynell's paper is also somewhat swift when he considers mediumship, NDEs and automatic writing. The structure of the essay is, in addition, a little confusing. For

example, the introduction of mediumship first appears as if its purpose were primarily to show that non-experimental evidence should also be taken into account. The paper, however, continues by discussing other phenomena associated with life after death. Only then does Meynell return to the idea of evidence in both experiences and apparent communications because of their similarity, even though the overall discussion is now centring on the issue of survival. Meynell concludes his contribution by saying that he thinks that life after death is possible. The essay covers a lot of ground in a short space and it is perhaps best regarded as introductory and as setting the general background for the other contributions.

Donald Evans' paper 'Parapsychology: Merits and limits' is a lengthy, but well-written and interesting contribution to the collection. It discusses and differentiates between two possible approaches to the paranormal. These approaches are the 'causal mechanism' or positivist approach and the 'psi ability' approach.

The causal mechanism approach requires that an anomaly be established and that an appropriate explanation for the anomaly be provided. The psi ability approach, however, does not require there to be an anomaly that requires scientific explanation; it focuses instead more on agent causality. Evans argues for a psi ability approach.

He discusses the principles of scientific method and he shows how the experimental method generally presupposes a causal mechanism approach. Evans notes that if scientific tests should be repeatable at will, scientists are embroiled in a contradiction, for they are thereby maintaining both a causal mechanism approach and that there is a volitional (i.e., agent driven) component. He continues by outlining the difficulties involved in applying an experimental method to determine mental causality. These difficulties are that (i) mental events cannot be observed directly from the third person viewpoint; (ii) they tend to be elusive; and (iii) they are not easy for an experimenter to summons. If the

mental event is to be summonsed by the participant, then one is assuming agent causality. Evans discusses in detail Braud and Schlitz's DMILS experiment.

He concludes his essay by suggesting that some people require greater statistical significance in order to be convinced of the operation of psi than others is because they are concerned about establishing an anomaly (which Evans takes to inherently presuppose a positivist approach to psi), whereas others are more interested in psi as an ability and in the way in which psi can be practically applied.

David Ray Griffin's paper 'Why critical reflection on the paranormal is so important — and so difficult' is primarily a historical account of how and why the current, mechanistic worldview came into prominence. It is an interesting contribution and it is the last one in this set of papers concerning the nature of parapsychological investigations. By examining the historical roots and discerning the overall context in which the modern worldview is placed, Griffin shows why critical reflection on the paranormal is so difficult.

By 'difficult' Griffin is referring to practical difficulties rather than to the apparent intractability of some of the individual problems within parapsychology *per se*. It is difficult, in Griffin's sense, to discuss parapsychology, because the current worldview came about for deep-rooted historical reasons such as preserving the authority of the church ('miracles' were the purview of God, not of humans), to overcome the witch craze of the sixteenth century and because all known causal influence was explained through contact (and paranormal events are those which involve 'influence at a distance'). Griffin argues that 'critical reflection' about the paranormal involves an open minded consideration of the evidence and a careful consideration of its implications. These two criteria mirror his earlier contention that opinions are formed on empirical evidence and on the basis of one's worldview.

Interestingly, he does not include a criterion to mirror his claim that opinions are also based on wishful thinking — on

what one would like to be the case. Perhaps the term 'open-minded' along with the omission of a counterpart to wishful thinking in the criteria for 'critical reflection' was supposed to imply that wishful thinking should not play a part in assessing the paranormal. However, the inherent presupposition that one can assess anything without one's inner hopes and wishes playing any part whatsoever — even if only at a very implicit level — may be a trifle optimistic. Thus I would suggest that to these criteria for critical thinking there should be added the requirement that one should analyse, and have an awareness of, the effect that one's own deep-rooted predispositions have on the way in which one reflects about the paranormal.

Griffin argues that if one interprets precognition in such a way that backwards causation is not necessary, then although the changes to the modern worldview will be extensive, they need not be revolutionary. Critical reflection about parapsychology is important because it could lead to a more coherent worldview.

The following four chapters all focus in some way on the evidence for discarnate life or survival. Although survival was one of the leading topics in the early days of psychical research, it has played a relatively lesser role in current times. It is, therefore, refreshing to see a selection of essays dealing with various aspects of this topic and to see some papers that address some questions that have hardly been dealt with before at all in the parapsychological literature.

Terence Penelhum's essay on 'Reflections on incorporeal agency' is the first of these four chapters. He begins by considering the case in which a tumbler moves at a seance when nobody has touched it. He asks what the difference is between explaining the movement as the spirit's PK and explaining it as the spirit inhabiting the tumbler. He terms the former as the psychokinetic (PK) model and the latter as the animation model. Are the two models significantly different? On considering the PK model, Penelhum asks whether our bodily movements are due to

PK. He notes, however, that there are differences between our bodily movements and the efficient 'willing' of participants in PK experiments to make more dice turn up sixes (for example). When I move my body I do not usually have to engage in any mental process to effect the action. In a PK experiment, however, participants have to make a specific effort of will in order to procure the required effect. Moreover, it is my part because I have control over my body rather than over anyone else's that the body is considered to be my own, whereas if I were to exert PK successfully on dice, I would not think that the dice belonged to my body.

Penelhum thus believes that there are two options for understanding spirit agency — either PK in which there must be a mental act first which causes the movement or the agency is immediate as it is in bodily movements. This latter is, effectively, the animation option, yet Penelhum wonders whether the animation option compromises the incorporeality of the spirit. It would appear that the spirit must either have intentional states that can move the object in question or have intentional states that are purely mental (and non-efficacious) in character. It is possible, therefore, to subsume the animation explanation under the PK model.

The problems are further exasperated when one considers Divine agency. The PK model does not seem appropriate for God because it would entail God having to recite a mental act before he could effect anything. Penelhum ends his paper by discussing further problems about embodiment and the Divine and he concludes that in some respects the Divine mental life must be similar to our own.

Susan Armstrong's following paper on animal psi [anpsi] and its implications for animal survival after death is a very welcome contribution to the book, since it is a topic that has generally been little discussed in parapsychology. Armstrong begins by reviewing — very (and perhaps *too*) briefly — some anecdotal observations and experimental and semi-experimental studies on anpsi to illustrate that the postulation of

anpsi is not unreasonable and that it has experimental support.

The paper then embarks on an analysis of animal psi in relation to Whitehead's process philosophy, focusing on Griffin's (1993) article in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*. The exposition of Whitehead's philosophy is rather fast and some key concepts — such as Ultimate Reality and 'inorganic occasion' — are not defined. As a result those readers not familiar with Whitehead or with Griffin's article may find this particular contribution a little hard to follow.

Armstrong suggests that animal experience may be proportionally more conscious than that of humans, because animals do not have the same storage capacity in memory that humans do. This greater storage capacity gives human beings the ability to react to more things automatically due to complex, culturally governed behaviour. Animals as a result are more situated in the moment. This in turn means that they would excel at receptive psi. Armstrong cites psi-trailing and homing abilities of animals as evidence to support this hypothesis.

She notes that the four main reasons that Christian thinkers have advanced for animal immortality are (i) Divine justice — animal suffering has to be recompensed (ii) Universal spirituality — that spirituality is not limited to human rationality (iii) Universal deliverance and (iv) God's inexhaustible capacity for love. Armstrong believes that anpsi is a fifth reason, for it suggests that animals have a distinct mentality that might survive bodily death. She also cites cases of animal ghosts and apparitions as further evidence in support of this claim.

Heather Botting also discusses apparitions in her paper 'Medico-scientific assumptions regarding paradeath phenomena: Explanation or obfuscation?' Botting gives a somewhat fictionalized overview of typical near-death experiences (NDEs) from the perspective of the experiencers, the relatives to whom the experiences are first reported and of the physicians and medical staff who hear the reports. The attitudes of

medical staff, Botting claims, are generally dismissive and they fall back on outdated explanations such as the effect of anoxia, drugs or anaesthesia. Unfortunately, the discussion is brief and Botting does not question whether the counter-arguments to physiological explanations for NDEs are themselves controversial. Botting gives a few instances in which people gain information inaccessible to them at the time of their NDE, but she concludes that ESP is inadequate as a counter-explanation because this would be to replace one mystery with another. She makes a similar claim in considering cases in which those who are dying report seeing apparitions, not only of deceased loved ones, but also of a person who everyone else believes to be alive. It is later discovered that this person seen at the point of death had actually died just beforehand. Here Botting maintains that ESP is an unlikely candidate because it 'usually functions in the transfer of thoughts or images within the brain' (p.171). The dismissal of ESP is inadequate and even appears to limit ESP to telepathy alone (which in any case could not be ruled out, because the above case could be explained as a telepathic linger effect in the apparition cases cited). Moreover ESP is at least a solid hypothesis, whereas Botting's paper does not appear to say what the alternative explanation for NDEs is, once physiological ones are ruled out, other than the vague claim that a new paradigm is coming into being.

Stephen Braude's paper is the final one in the set of essays that pertain to the issue of survival after death. He focuses for the most part on the literature on reincarnation. He claims to have four main complaints about this literature — namely that: (i) it fails to give serious consideration to the super-psi hypothesis; (ii) there is little apparent knowledge of relevant literature on dissociation and similar states; (iii) it does not consider the true extent of human abilities; and (iv) it is often psychologically naïve. The essay itself nevertheless focuses mainly only on points (i) and (iv) above.

Braude begins by considering the 'Hypothesis of parental influence'. He

notes that a study devoted to this hypothesis should consider subtle issues about why parents may unconsciously want their child to manifest itself as if it were the reincarnation of a particular personality. Instead he finds that these studies are more interested in determining whether fraud has been perpetrated by the parents (e.g., they ask whether the parents knew anything about the deceased person presumed to be reincarnated in their child and whether they know anything about patterns found in other reincarnation studies).

Braude argues in more than one place that the reincarnation literature makes many psychologically naive assumptions, such as supposing that parents would not encourage belief in reincarnation because it means that the supposedly reincarnated child will manifest irritating behaviour. Braude correctly notes that parents may have other overriding, unconscious motivations for believing that their child is a reincarnation of another person that would outweigh the inconvenience of the irritating behaviour of their child.

Interestingly, and yet to my mind rather peculiarly, Braude claims in the next section of his paper that the avoidance of depth-psychological, case-by-case studies is symptomatic of the refusal to take the super-psi hypothesis seriously. I find this accusation peculiar because there are a number of other possible reasons why depth-psychological, case-by-case studies have not been pursued. For example, researchers may feel they have neither the time nor the expertise for such an approach (presumably one would need to be skilled at not suggesting the required answer in asking the relevant depth-psychological questions and, as Braude himself notes, those carrying out the investigations do not have expertise in issues about suggestion and hypnosis etc.). Alternatively, investigators may feel that fraud is the first thing that has to be ruled out and that there are still areas in which this possibility has not yet been fully exhausted. And other researchers may feel that the ability to generalize is the first priority and that case-by-case studies revealing different factors at

play in each particular instance are a luxury that cannot yet be afforded.

Braude's interpretation is, however, interesting because it brings into sharp focus that even selecting a methodology is often already to rule out some hypotheses and to permit others. Moreover, it brings to light that the super-psi hypothesis itself may require a radically different form of investigation than those often currently conducted.

Braude continues his paper with a brief discussion of OBEs, noting that even experiments in which the person can view the target from one perspective only do not rule out clairvoyance, because clairvoyance is not necessarily analogous to perception (for instance, cards can be clairvoyantly seen even when they are face down and when they are thus not available in any normal perceptually analogous sense at all). Finally, he discusses other psychologically naive assumptions entrenched in the discussion of birthmarks in the reincarnation literature and he ends with a call for case-by-case studies that take the super-psi hypothesis more seriously.

The book ends with a return to issues about the difficulties inherent in parapsychology itself. James Horne's concluding essay centres specifically on what he terms the 'moral' charges that are held against parapsychology. These are that: (i) parapsychology wastes human resources; (ii) parapsychologists make intellectual errors and (iii) parapsychology corrupts those involved in it (both participants and experimenters). Points (i) and (iii) are relatively rarely considered in any great depth in parapsychology despite their obvious importance for the financial and moral health of the field. However, Horne's discussion of (i) is disappointing, considering that in the UK at least there was some popular discussion about how to justify philosophy for government funding, which would obviously have some relevance to the question in hand. Horne nevertheless merely concludes that the arguments about the waste of resources are superficial and that what is important is that parapsychology should be considered respectable. The

second charge is also relatively easily dismissed by noting that there is no more fraud in parapsychology than in other (respected) sciences and that parapsychology is still thought to be of dubious repute by most people because of popular (and mistaken) views of, for instance, stage psychics as being themselves 'parapsychologists'.

The third charge, however, is perhaps the most interesting. Horne considers the question of whether parapsychology itself corrupts those involved in it by examining the claim that a commitment to an unproven belief may cause harm. Although I expected a discussion about positive experimental claims perhaps encouraging pseudo-psychics to exploit the general public or an epistemological debate about 'unproven beliefs', Horne, perhaps more interestingly, continues by listing reasons for which parapsychology can still be considered problematic (e.g., the negative definition, failure to replicate not being presented as falsification of the psi hypothesis, the lack of reliable replication). Presumably, the aim of this list is to show that the beliefs are indeed 'unproven'.

Horne then asks whether experimental success is itself corruptive. He notes that if successful experimenters are those who have more empathy with their participants and if successful participants are 'sheep', then this may mean that the experimenters themselves could, in empathising, become 'true believers' rather than detached observers. He cites the case of Soal's fraud as an instance of an experimenter who was seduced by his subject matter. Unfortunately, again, the discussion is brief and rather superficial (he does not consider the idea that success in any field of endeavour could be seductive), but the point is of interest nevertheless. Horne concludes by supporting parapsychology, comparing it to gambling, but he warns those involved against extreme behaviour and obsessiveness.

In sum, the papers in this collection are a little variable in quality and, predictably, they differ in their knowledge base too. Some essays occasionally strike the reader

as lacking a strong knowledge of parapsychology, others sometimes strike the reader as philosophically weak.

The collection is nevertheless a welcome addition to the relatively small literature on philosophical aspects of parapsychology, especially since it raises some topics that have barely been given any attention at all in the past. And, despite the criticisms that I have offered, the majority of the papers are well argued and documented and they bring to the forefront some of the more interesting questions in parapsychology. It is likewise refreshing to see contributions from those outside of the Parapsychological Association, thus helping to render parapsychology as not an 'insiders only' topic. It should also be accessible to a relatively wide audience, since it presupposes a strong background in neither philosophy nor parapsychology. I can only hope that this book marks the beginning of an in-

creased interest by other academics in the problems inherent in the subject.

References

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