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**Book Review:**  
*The Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth  
of Psychic Phenomena*

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Caroline Watt  
Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh

A review of *The Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth of Psychic Phenomena* by Dean Radin, PhD. San Francisco: Harper Edge, 1997. Hbk: £16.50/\$25. Pp 345. ISBN 0-06-251502-0

*The Conscious Universe* is an inspirational introduction to experimental parapsychology that ambitiously reviews the results of hundreds of studies conducted over the past century and sets these within a philosophical, sociological and metaphysical context. Such a remit has the potential to be a laborious read, but in fact Radin's wry humour, flair, and clarity of writing style mean that this book is easily accessible to readers. The humour sometimes catches you by surprise. For instance, in Chapter 15 Radin quotes the philosopher Nietzsche's famous phrase: "God is dead". This is followed by a reference to the chapter notes at the back of the book, where one finds the postscript: "It is rumoured that a few decades later, God replied with, 'Nietzsche is dead.'" (p.318).

The intended readers are, as Radin indicates in his introduction, those whose prior contact with the field has primarily been limited to the kinds of caricatures that appear in the popular media, with which most of us are painfully familiar. Professional parapsychologists might also find the book useful, as an up-to-date general reference text. Each chapter is supported by notes at the end of the book, and these are followed by 25 pages of references and a detailed index.

Radin does an admirable job of taking

the novice on a journey that begins with simple definitions of terms. He considers the importance of replication and the role of meta-analysis in achieving it, reviews the major findings of experimental parapsychology, and ends with metaphysical considerations such as bidirectional causation. My principal reservation is that from my perspective (as a professional parapsychologist whose opinion about the existence of psi is neutral shading into positive), I see the book as a brilliant act of rhetoric, persuasive to the novice, but perhaps less persuasive for those with a detailed knowledge of the controversies that both strengthen and hinder parapsychology. Before attempting to justify this reaction, let me give a more detailed account of the book's contents.

*The Conscious Universe* is organised into four themes: motivation, evidence, understanding, and implications. The four chapters under the motivation theme argue persuasively that, although psychic experiences have been reported across centuries and across cultures, we must move to experimental techniques to provide convincing evidence of psi. The reader is introduced to the importance of replication, and critically, to the use of meta-analysis as a way of measuring replication. Radin thus lays the foundations for the heart of the book: evidence.

The accumulated evidence for psi is presented in Chapters 5 to 9: Telepathy; Perception at a distance; Perception through time; Mind-matter interaction; and Mental interactions with living

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organisms. Chapters 10 to 12 deal with the relatively recent Field consciousness studies, Psi in the casino, and Applications. In most of these chapters, Radin gives a clear introduction including a brief history of research attempts, and a description of typical methodology. He then presents diagrams, supported by the text, summarising meta-analytic treatments of hundreds of studies in various groupings (e.g., grouped according to research centre; grouped according to methodology), often with a combined 'all studies' estimate of effect size. The diagrams are a useful technique for visually summarising an otherwise overwhelming amount of detail. If one accepts them at face value, they appear to provide similarly overwhelming evidence for the reality of psi or, if one were to be more cautious, for the presence of an unexplained effect in the experiments.

The third theme, understanding, considers why, despite the public availability of such apparently overwhelming evidence, parapsychologists still struggle for funding and few scientists seem to be aware of the evidence for psi. In the final theme, Radin gamely considers the implications of this evidence for theory development, science, philosophy and religion.

Although Radin claims to have 'de-emphasized' his personal role in experimental parapsychology, his passion for the subject permeates the text and it is quite likely that many readers will find his enthusiasm to be contagious. This could be no bad thing for parapsychology, if it increases informed interest in the field, especially among potential funders. Radin argues, however, that accepting psi is not a question of faith: the results speak for themselves and throughout the book he presents an apparently persuasive statistical case for the reality of psi phenomena.

He states: "The evidence for these basic phenomena (various forms of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, psychic healing, and psychokinesis) is so well established that most psi researchers today no longer conduct 'proof-oriented' experiments. Instead, they focus largely on "process-

oriented" questions ... " (p.6, my parentheses). Radin's argument depends on the strength of meta-analysis as a technique for demonstrating that we have replicable evidence of psi. Now here comes one of these irritating disclaimers: *I'm no statistician, but ...* what I have experienced and read of meta-analysis leads me to believe that the use of this technique, while an improvement on the traditional narrative literature review, nevertheless is not quite such an objective and polished approach as Radin portrays.

When conducting a meta-analysis, one codes a study according to various criteria. Not only is the selection of what criteria to include a personal decision, but often the published study details do not give information that fits neatly into the coding categories. Moreover, if the original study reports several different outcome statistics, the meta-analyst must decide whether to use an averaged outcome measure, restrict the database to those studies only reporting one type, and so on. No option is entirely satisfactory and in this decision, as in so many others made during meta-analysis, a complex and more or less subjective judgement call is required.

Radin does not ignore these potential problems, stating: "critics of meta-analysis (critics are everywhere) have argued that these integrative techniques can be biased or oversimplified" (p.54) and he argues in return that "meta-analysis requires explicit details of how the analysis was performed, thus allowing independent analysts to confirm the evaluation. Also, when we use *all* the relevant studies in the analysis rather than just the "good" studies, most of the problems related to reviewer bias are prevented" (p.54). In practice, when analysts with different opinions and orientations attempt to conduct identical meta-analyses, one quickly sees disagreements emerging over coding, and over interpretation of the outcome. This illustrates that meta-analysis often does not provide neat, cut-and-dried answers to questions.

So far as the book is a vehicle for presenting the evidence for psi, Radin is in some sense in a no-win situation. If he

does include all the gory details then the book would be five times as long, the arguments would be convoluted, and the target audience would give up after the first couple of chapters. If, as I think, he glosses over coverage of factors that muddy our interpretation of experimental parapsychology's results, then he risks presenting too rosy a view of our findings so far and our future prospects.

Earlier, I said I viewed the book as a brilliant act of rhetoric. This is in part due to the clear structure and ambitious scale of the book. I am particularly impressed by Radin's attempt to set these experimental findings in their broader scientific and philosophical context. This is something that is often skimmed on in other books.

For example, in chapter 15 (Metaphysics), Radin charts the change in worldview from mediaeval times, where scholastic authority shaped our view of nature. The discoveries of Copernicus, Descartes, Galileo and Newton gave science power and split our worldview into two: the part that was considered unmeasurable — the mind part — became the domain of philosophy and religion; science gave us the metaphor of the universe as a "great machine" — the matter part. Radin then considers how this bipartite worldview is beginning to break down. For example, the 'weird' world of quantum physics with its concepts — measurable, not abstract or metaphorical — of non-local correlation and of the importance of the observer that seem to suggest a kind of action at a distance that does not fit

easily into a world-view that separates mind from matter.

Radin argues: "Parapsychology fits in this picture by straddling the edge separating the mind-oriented disciplines such as clinical and transpersonal psychology and the matter-oriented disciplines such as neuroscience and cognitive science. Parapsychology explicitly studies the interactions between consciousness and the physical world. It assumes that downward causation exists in some form, and it assumes that scientific methods can be used to study this middle realm in a rigorous way. Thus the persistent controversy over psi can be traced back to the founding assumptions of modern science." (p.263). I think this is an excellent conceptualisation of parapsychology's position.

To sum up, my impression is that the book is less of an impartial presentation of the evidence for psi than Radin claims. Yes, data can speak for themselves, but our interpretation of what they say must be tempered by a consideration of the strength of the original studies, and of the analysis techniques. The informed reader therefore might not accept Radin's interpretation uncritically. As an introduction to experimental parapsychology, and in how Radin sets this in its broader perspective, I think the book is superb.

Caroline Watt  
Department of Psychology  
University of Edinburgh  
7 George Square  
Edinburgh EH8 9JZ  
SCOTLAND, UK