PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSIONS OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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J. O. Wheatley and Hoyt L. Edge (eds.): Philosophical Dimensions of Parapsychology. Pp. VI + 483. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1976. Cloth, $28.25.

This anthology probably will not fulfill a need felt by a great number of philosophers; this, however, is not to the discredit of the editors, but rather to that of the fairly large body of unknowing philosophers. While it is perhaps not patent that parapsychological or "psi" phenomena have any or indeed severe philosophical implications, surely the fact that a number of the more acute philosophical minds of this century who have immersed themselves in the relevant data, both experimental and spontaneous, has taken there to be; it should be sufficient to spark more than passing curiosity. To play the proverbial ostrich, head buried in the sand, is a certain way of not discovering whether there is anything to be alarmed about. And it must be admitted that a substantial percentage of philosophers has assumed this posture concerning parapsychological phenomena.

It may come as something of a surprise to many, at least in the United States, that the British Society for Psychical Research and its American counterpart have been headed by the likes of Henry Sidgwick, William James, C.D. Broad, H.H. Price, and Curt Ducasse; that contemporary "empiricist" philosophers such as Anthony Flew and Michael Scriven have devoted a great deal of attention to the issues of the "paranormal" (the former having written a book on psi research, the latter having founded the first parapsychological research group in the Southern hemisphere); or that Kant's curious but infrequently-read Dreams of a Spirit-Seer had as partial inspiration for its subject matter the bizarre, sensitive, and Renaissance-charactered scholar, Swedenborg.

In any case, this volume is welcome for other reasons. While for sometime there has been scattered throughout the literature a reasonably "broad" spectrum of fine and incisive papers, none of the best of them has been brought together in a collection of purely philosophical readings. The compilation itself then is laudable. But, more crucially, an anthology of

papers by clear-headed thinkers on the subject will serve the curious but cautious as an antidote to the revulsion that a perusal of the ubiquitous pseudo-philosophical tracts generates. Though not all of the papers are of high quality, most are quite interesting; this book will certainly fulfill its purpose as a respectable text for a course in the perplexing but exciting field of the philosophy of parapsychology.

The text itself is divided into five sections concerning the relation between psi and philosophy, cognition, precognition, survival, and science. In the first, Broad's paper, "The Relation of Psychical Research to Philosophy," though somewhat dated (1949), is a useful introductory piece on the relevance of psi to philosophical thought. He constructs a list of very general principles, heterogeneous in their logical status, which, he claims, constitute a kind of conceptual framework for the educated Western man's and scientist's "world." These tenets bear on causation, the mode of operation of our intentions and desires on the physical world, the relation between mind and brain, and the manner in which we come to know about events which we have not ourselves experienced. That each of these is universally held is false; but that most of them are widely assumed and yet appear prima facie to have counterexamples in one or another psi phenomenon (telepathy and clairvoyance, either post-cognitive, contemporary, or pre-cognitive, and psychokinesis) is sufficient to warrant Broad's stating them. That some of them are not purely conceptual but rather deeply entrenched empirical principles may cause raised eyebrows among those who are especially sensitive to philosophers' overstepping their disciplinary bounds. Broad's comment concerning this reaction is worthy of notice:

> I think that there are some definitions of "philosophy" according to which it would not be concerned with these [parapsychological] or any other newly discovered facts, no matter how startling . . [but] if we can judge of what philosophy is by what great philosophers have done in the past . . . philosophy involves at least two . . . closely connected activities which I call synopsis and synthesis. Synopsis is the deliberate viewing together of aspects of human experience which, for one reason or another are generally kept apart by by the plain man and even by the professional scientist or scholar. The object of synopsis is to try to find out how these various aspects are interrelated. Synthesis is the attempt to supply a coherent set of concepts and principles which shall cover satisfactorily all the regions of fact which have been viewed synoptically. (pp. 11-12)

And also to the point is the treatment Price gives in a paper dealt with later:

> In the early stages of any inquiry it is a mistake to lay down a hard and fast distinction between a scientific investigation of the facts and philosophical reflection about them. . . . At later stages the distinction is right and proper. But if it is drawn too soon and too rigorously those later stages will never be reached. (p. 109)

Mundle's admirably sane paper, "Strange Facts in Search of A Theory," stresses that the central explicanda of psi research, telepathy and clairvoyance, do not wear their ontological character on their faces. This is a deceptively simple point for I suspect that more than a few philosophers who find themselves inclined to dismiss parapsychology do so because they assume that to admit the reality of its subject matter is ipso facto to embrace some philosophical position, for example, Cartesian dualist interactionism, which has since been discarded for other reasons. Definitions of telepathy as awareness by one mind of the contents of another without a physical medium are question-begging and encourage the recoil of the incredulous.

In the second section, on cognition, two widespread but misleading models of telepathy and clairvoyance are subjected to criticism. The first is that they are forms of perception (consider the moniker "ESP") and the second that they constitute forms of knowledge, either by acquaintance or discursive. To understand why such accounts are inadequate, let us look at an apt comparison Price gives in his paper "Some Philosophical Questions Concerning Telepathy and Clairvoyance" between a case of telepathic exchange and that of a person's getting the flu from another. My flu symptoms, though caused by your flu, need not be of the same kind as yours. I have a sore throat and a cough while you have a runny nose and sinus congestion. In like manner, with respect to telepathy, perhaps while you are imagining Joe DiMaggio, I may come to image a baseball, or, better yet, the sound of a cracking baseball bat. Neither am I in acquaintance with your "sensa" nor are the modalities of my sensa and yours the same. Or perhaps I have no sensa at all but just blurt out "World Series." If we are separated by some distance, I may have absolutely no idea what the origin of my musings are. Would we want to term this "knowledge"? Further, if we reflect on Zener card-guessing in experimental situations where someone amasses a string of veridical calls far exceeding chance expectation, say, eight out of twenty-five over thousands of runs. Where chance would be five out

of twenty-five, would we be likely to ascribe the "success" to a faculty which could bring us knowledge?

Among the issues which have most exercised the theoretical imagination of philosophers concerned with psi, precognition stands preeminent. The logical conundrums generated by the characterization of it as "non-inferential awareness of the future" have driven Broad to comment that if it is not logically impossible then ... there is good evidence for it and G. Spencer Brown, upon seeing the statistical data, to argue that there must be something amiss with the statistical notion of chance. Just as with non-precognitive telepathy and clairvoyance, some philosophical objections to its intelligibility are rooted in definitions of it. If it is to be understood as perception of the future, and one holds a causal theory, we are overcome with the uneasy feeling that the future is, in Flew's phrase, already "here" or, at any rate, "there."

Broad's long paper, "The Philosophical Implications of Foreknowledge," is an extended attempt to so characterize precognition that it is logically possible. We do not, he says, perceive the future; rather we "prehend" an <u>image</u> of the future, just as in memory (or, for that matter I suppose, in post-cognitive telepathy or clairvoyance) we "prehend" an image of the past and not the past itself. Broad's account is somewhat marred by his reliance on an imagist theory of memory; but that aside, we <u>can</u> give vis-a-vis memory some kind of causal theoretical account through our having been at one time "present" in what is now the past. How can we offer an analogue for precognition without postulating a future event as cause of something present, i.e., our prehending of an image? Broad asks us to conceive of multiple time dimensions at the intersection of which we find the causative event to be future in one dimension but not so in the other(s). The Humean restriction on the temporal location of causes being relaxed, we are able to have our cake in one dimension and eat it in another.

Ducasse, in "A Theory of the Relation of Causality to Precognition," tries to sidestep these puzzles over causation by employing a quasi-Kantian tack that physical events possess no intrinsic temporality, i.e., in themselves they are neither past, present, or future. They <u>become</u> present by getting perceived by someone. Thus the <u>very same event</u> can be present twice: when it is "precognized" in a dream say and when it is experienced in the light of day. Whereas Ducasse offers a story about time so that it is fundamentally psychological in nature and thus circumvents the stickiness

encountered above, Bob Brier, while not arguing precognition to necessitate backward causation, argues the latter to be logically possible given just a single dimension of time.

One might well wonder how the question of the survival of bodily death could wend its way into being a concern for those investigating telepathy or clairvoyance. The reasons are, at least in part, historical. The survival hypothesis got invoked by quite a number of theorists early on in psychical research to solve those baffling cases where some person seemed to obtain information not possessed orignally by himself or anyone else living. And the phenomena of "hauntings," apparitions, deathbed and otherwise, coupled with some of the more astounding mediumistic deliverances (e.g., the Verrall, Piper et al. "cross-correspondences") stimulated the acceptance of survival as a plausible theory. However the appearance of mediums apparently possessed of remarkable capacities for "culling" information from living and extant sources diminished the necessity for, if not the attractiveness of the theory.

The logical perplexities intricately bound up with the survival question have engaged philosophers independently of such hair-raising mediumistic exploits. Thus there exists a substantial literature on personal identity, and, the puzzle of whether bodily identity, or, for that matter, a body at all is necessary for the ascription of such. Penelhum, in "Survival and Disembodied Existence," which, incidentally, is a chapter from the 1970 book of the same name, echoes Shoemaker's defence of the memory criterion for personal identity as an essentially dependent one. The bodily criterion is the more fundamental. Flew, in "Is There A Case for Disembodied Survival?", argues roughly the same thing. At minimum this line informs us that if indeed anything survives death it cannot be a person; maximally it tells us that the very notion of consciousness is conceptually tied to that of the body. It is for this reason that Flew suggests the "astral" body theory to have the least logical difficulties while simultaneously having no other support for it. This much is relatively old hat for those who have followed the debate over the last twenty or so years.

Both Broad's "Personal Identity and Survival" and Ducasse's "How Stands the Case for the Reality of Survival?" have it that it is at least logically possible for a center of consciousness to survive death. Ducasse in fact holds that survival of such is probable. Curiously enough, some of the fascinating turns that the dialogue over personal identity haye taken, thanks in large part to several of Derek Parfit's intriguing

papers, have precursors in various of Broad's papers on the subject of survival, and, in particular, the one included here. A fair percentage of those cases for the explanation of which the survival theory has been made use of do not require the postulation of the survival of a full-fledged person. Consider the cases of some hauntings where, if we are inclined towards the survival hypothesis, we seem required to countenance a kind of moronic being, ludicrously fixated on regions of a room or doomed, Sisyphus-like, to pound on walls. Some mediumistic phenomena suggest, again given a survivalist interpretation, partial coalescence of consciousnesses of deceased human beings or the obliteration of normal cognitive capacities. For those who suspect that supporters of the survival hypothesis are merely engaging in wishful thinking Broad is healthy reading in that he conjures up a number of quite disturbing, indeed terrifying, scenarios for post-mortem existence to fit the present data. "It is worthwhile to remember, though there is nothing we can do about it, that the world as it really is may easily be a far nastier place than it would be if scientific materialism were the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

The capability of parapsychology's meeting such standards as to be deemed "scientific" is the question treated in the book's final section. Are there any methodological principles or ontological assumptions peculiar to psi research? While accepting for parapsychology the standard formal requirements for experimentation, Beloff, in "Parapsychology and Its Neighbors," disavows for it what he thinks are the "physicalist" presuppositions of the other recognized sciences. He does, rightly I think, reject the modish lingo of a "paraphysics" with its "psi fields" and "psi energy"; and also the converse tactic, made use of by some writers anxious to legitimize the study of psi, of claiming that contemporary physics has been "spiritualized." Yet his eschewing of the <u>possibility</u> of a physical explanation of psi is ill-founded. Part of the difficulty has to do with the ambiguity surrounding the word "physical." In the philosophy of mind, it has a fairly delimited connotation, i.e., physiological. Insofar as it pertains to physics, it may mean, simply, conforming to or being an instance of a conceptual model in contemporary physics. In a more open-ended sense it may refer to the character of whatever scheme of entities some <u>future</u> physics will countenance. Beloff takes the "information" problem to be telling against a physical interpretation of psi. This problem comprises the explaining of a clairvoyant or telepathic

subject's ability to discriminate a target from an infinite number of other objects in his environment. But as Scriven and Meehl point out in their concise paper, "The Compatibility of Science and ESP," what the information problem is a problem for is a simple radiation theory of psi. But no simple radiation theory can explain the Pauli principle either; this does not lead us to assert that we are there dealing with "nonphysical" phenomena or that no future physics will be able to account for such. We simply don't know enough about these things, i.e., psi phenomena, to do much better than describe them negatively. Thus telepathy and clairvoyance are the obtaining of information from persons or objects in none of the known ways. Beyond this it becomes very difficult to feel assured that we can make any decisive or final statements about the explanatory scheme appropriate for them.

Of some interest is the question of whether psi phenomena could adjudicate between rival theories of mind. That they can has been taken for granted in the past by psi researchers. When Sidgwick and Myers founded the British Society for Psychical Research it was their hope to vindicate some form of Cartesian dualism over against the epiphenomenalism of their day. Mundle, while not plumping for idealism, suggests that of the classical theories of mind, idealism perhaps is most economical in accounting for both telepathy and clairvoyance. Most of the physicalist accounts of telepathy offered by contemporary philosophers of mind suffer from their inabiltiy to simultaneously take care of clairvoyance. Gardner Murphy's "Are There Any Solid Facts in Psychical Research?" portrays the state of psi research as badly in need of some unifying theoretical model. And he considers that the construction of theories of mind are of paramount importance. But contemporary philosophy of mind, despite the strong fashion of functionalism, is really in no great position to come to the theoretical aid of psychical research. Indeed, David Armstrong, whose A Materialist Theory of Mind catalyzed philosophical psychology, takes the findings of psychical research to be "a small black cloud on the horizon of a Materialist theory of mind." This caution is based on the possibility, however slight, that no future physics will be able to handle psi. But we discussed this point above.

The weakest papers in the anthology are the last two. LeShan's "Individual Realities: Commonsense, Science, and Mysticism" is a confused amalgam of awkward logic and the unjustified importation into theorizing about psi of ethico-religious concerns. He baldly

asserts that there is an incompatibility between the common-sense viewpoint of the world and what he dubs the "clairvoyant" perspective. According to the former, psi phenomena simply cannot occur. But they do occur. "We must do something about this paradox." What he proposes is that we simply allow there to be two different ways of looking at reality, each "valid in its own right." Thus, on the former, free will exists, while on the latter, it does not; on the former an event is good, neutral, or evil, but on the latter, good and evil are illusory and so on. There are a whole variety of points to be made here. First, it is not completely clear that the common sense view of the world, if there really is any such consistent and uniform animal, makes any provision for the occurrence or non-occurrence of psi phenomena. LeShan cites Broad's discussion of Basic Limiting Principles in support of his point. But I do not think that these limiting principles constitute the common-sense view of the world or that Broad claimed them to do so. They formed the outlook of the educated Western man and scientist. These need not be the same. Secondly, the difficulty for this scheme of differing viewpoints is that either their fundamental tenets contradict one another, in which case we have a violation of the principle of contradiction in speaking of one reality different aspects of which the man of common-sense and the "clairvoyant" perceive; or they do not contradict one another, in which case there is no paradox in simultaneously adopting both. More urgently though, I am somewhat concerned with LeShan's casting of the second viewpoint above as "clairvoyant" and not simply "mystical." There is no necessary connection between psi phenomena and mysticism either in terms of what the psychic or mystic would say about themselves or their experiences, or in terms of what they must say about themselves or their experiences; or in terms of the kind of explanation we might try to give for the occurrence of either psi phenomena or mystical experience. LeShan's making of this tie is symptomatic of what I take to be a dangerous trend among some contemporary writers to invest psychic phenomena with religious significance. This is the fervor of spiritualism in new clothes, and if this sort of evangelism comes to predominate, parapsychology will again find itself suspect among the very people whose aid it seeks to enlist, that is, researchers in the physical sciences.

There is some evidence to show that some persons who have demonstrated psi abilities have those abilities enhanced by entering various "altered states of consciousness." From both spontaneous and experimental cases we know that telepathy can occur in situations of extreme distress or powerful emotion, in hypnogogic states and in semi-trance (thus the expression "trance medium"). Tart wishes to argue that we can fruitfully, and in a manner consistent with "the essence of Scientific

method," examine such altered states. But this is not to be understood just in the sense that we might, for example, give a subject LSD and then test his motor skill or cognitive capacities; rather, if I understand him, Tart suggests that an examiner can come to pronounce competently on the accuracy, of the subject's description of the reality he claims to come into contact with when in such states. This requires that the examiner himself enter the state in question in order to encounter this mode of reality, with its own "logic and principles." The assumption then is that in such states we do not inaccurately perceive things, but that we accurately perceive things in a different way. I do not wish to maintain that inducing such states and examining our experiences therein cannot be of some value. But I do wonder whether that value is in any sense philosophical. There are knotty problems indeed concerning the ontological status of dreams and hallucinations, but it is not evident that in dreaming or hallucinating we must be said, in any important sense, to be coming into contact with another portion of reality or that we are viewing the same reality from another "equally valid" perspective. One is reminded of Hobbes' pithy comment that if a man tells him that last night God spoke to him in a dream, this is "no more than to say that last night he dreamed that God spoke to him."