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Guest Editorial: Was the Attempt to Identify Parapsychology as a Separate Field of Science Misguided?

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ABSTRACT: The paucity of recent strong evidence of paranormal phenomena may have several causes. One of these may be the mistake of trying to identify a separate discipline known as *parapsychology*. Many poorly qualified persons, some of them not even scientists, have been attracted into the designated field; such persons have contributed no new ideas or data, but have become burdensome commentators or journalistic exploiters of the data obtained by a few investigators. Scientists outside the field, especially critics who do not take the trouble to study it carefully but who are nevertheless influential, easily condemn parapsychology as a whole for its failure to maintain high standards of scholarship and ethical conduct. Furthermore, by huddling together in a self-designated quasi-professional group, parapsychologists have isolated themselves from other scientists and diminished their capacity both to influence them and to be stimulated by them.

The remedy lies in abandoning the pretentiousness of parapsychology as a separate discipline and in encouraging young scientists interested in psychical research to establish themselves, after thorough scientific training, in research universities where they can be productive both in conventional lines of research and in studying paranormal phenomena. Unhampered by the negative connotations of parapsychology, they will find it easier to collaborate with scientists of recognized disciplines. This may bring an infusion of new ideas that are needed for the advancement of psychical research.

Investigators of paranormal phenomena have known of the "decline effect" in individual experiments at least since those of Estabrooks (1927). I think we can now observe a decline effect throughout the entire field of psychical research. It has become more and more difficult to obtain strong evidence of paranormal processes. Probably several causes have contributed to this situation. For one, a general increase in what I call philosophical materialism (to distinguish it from economic materialism)

 $^{^{\}rm I}$ Thanks are due to Jürgen Keil and Emily Williams Cook for comments that helped to improve this essay.

has eroded belief in paranormal phenomena and perhaps thereby inhibited their occurrence (Stevenson, 1983). This could have a circular effect, because the fewer convincing paranormal phenomena we can report the stronger materialism (and its inhibiting influence) will become.

It is also possible that something fundamentally wrong in the approach of investigators to the phenomena has blocked their ability to elicit better evidence during recent decades. Some observers have suggested that there never were any genuine phenomena to begin with, but I disagree with this view, and I believe that good past evidence is as good as it ever was. However, we cannot survive for long on evidence from the past, and our failure to produce better evidence now shows that something in our present approach is seriously wrong. I have said earlier that we should correct the current imbalance in psychical research and renew the study of spontaneous cases (Stevenson, 1987). However, that is only one suggestion, and many others could be made. Yet who is to make them? Imaginative new ideas will only come from new researchers. Progress will depend upon attracting first-rate scientists to the investigation of paranormal phenomena. Why are such people not joining the effort in greater numbers?

I suggest that one impediment to such recruitment—I do not say it is the only one—is the mistake that was made trying to delineate a separate branch of science known as parapsychology. Historians attribute this move to J. B. Rhine, who (with McDougall) adopted the word parapsychology from Dessoir (Hövelmann, 1987; Thalbourne, 1982; Thalbourne & Rosenbaum, 1986). By identifying his work with a new word (for America), Rhine hoped thereby, it seems, to convince other scientists that what he was doing was more scientific than the work of earlier investigators in the field. Rhine's experiments were not more scientific than earlier work in psychical research, but they more closely resembled experiments that were then (in the 1920s and 1930s) being conducted in conventional psychology. It was not unreasonable for him to have expected to earn credit by methodological imitation—if it were successful. Although he himself was trained in plant biology, he fostered the idea of parapsychology as a special discipline of science, and its investigators were to be called parapsychologists. A natural, although not inevitable, further development was Rhine's initiative in founding the Parapsychological Association in 1957. This was originally conceived as a compact group of scientifically trained investigators.

These moves may initially have had some positive effects in facilitating an esprit de corps among the active investigators and in providing them with opportunities to exchange ideas about their research. However, the desired acceptance of parapsychology by scientists has not occurred, and the words *parapsychology* and *parapsychologist* have gradually acquired negative connotations that are now proving gravely disadvantageous. (I know of young scientists interested in psychical research who have dissembled their connections with parapsychology or have been advised that, for the sake of their careers, they should do so.) There are several reasons

for the failure of parapsychology to become creditable among other scientists.

In the first place, it has proved impossible to restrict the use of the terms parapsychology and parapsychologist, and as they seem to offer the cachet of a scientist, they have been eagerly adopted by all sorts of persons who, although enthusiastic and (mostly) well-intentioned, have had little training in science or even none at all. The Parapsychological Association has proven powerless in this matter; indeed, like many young societies, it fallaciously has sought strength in numbers and has admitted to associate and sometimes even to full membership almost anyone who has declared a serious interest in the field. The result has been that persons calling themselves parapsychologists advertise themselves as such on the jackets of crassly popular books; others give their names and that of parapsychology to travel brochures promising to take tourist victims to meet shamans in India or to see haunted castles in Europe. All sorts of undisciplined "courses" in parapsychology are offered at (mostly inferior) colleges and universities.²

Something like Gresham's law ("bad money drives out good money") applies to professional groups as well as to economics; and much of what goes on under the heading of parapsychology is bound to repel scientists in well-established disciplines, accustomed as they are to higher standards of scholarship and ethical conduct. Thus the word *parapsychology*, originally intended to earn respect, now often evokes dismay and derision. Not surprisingly, the investigators of near-death experiences of the past two decades have remained aloof from parapsychology, and most of them seem ignorant of reports of such experiences in the earlier literature of psychical research. At least they rarely cite such reports in their publications. Instead of publishing in parapsychological journals, they started their own journal. Are they cut off from other scientists or are parapsychologists?

Because there were no recognized criteria of previous training required to become a parapsychologist, the name became attractive to many persons who assumed the roles of critics, commentators, and publicists. These now far outnumber the few active investigators in the field. In parapsychology a horde of camp followers—many of them plunderers—impede the forward movement of the tiny platoon of weapon-carrying combatants. A recent issue of a parapsychological journal exemplified this disproportion. It was almost entirely devoted to a single article (Hyman & Honorton, 1986), together with comments on it by no fewer than 11 discussants. Of these 11 contributors, according to my knowledge, only one had ever performed an experiment concerned with the type described in

² I welcome teaching about paranormal phenomena within the context of courses in recognized disciplines, such as psychology, physics, anthropology, and religious studies. The harmfulness of courses in parapsychology lies in the presumption that they qualify those who take them in a scientific discipline.

the "target article," and only three others had ever performed *any* experiments on paranormal phenomena. The other seven had set themselves up as experts or had been co-opted as such by the journal's editor. Perhaps this is an extreme example. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that for every paper published or presented that reports really new data, three or four are offered as critiques, commentaries, historical reviews, meta-analyses, theories, proposals for new research (rarely implemented), and advice from the many who do no research to the few who do. What has happened to the Baconian principle adopted by our pioneers of laboriously collecting observations and patiently studying them for recurrent features? It seems to have been cancelled by a relapse into Aristotelian conjectures.

The outnumbering of the workers by the nonworkers that has developed in the journals publishing papers on parapsychology has no parallel in such disciplines as physics, chemistry, or medicine. In the journals of these and other established branches of science, one has no claim to a reader's attention unless one has at some time contributed important data to the field. Every field can use one or two armchair critics, but parapsychology has enough to keep a furniture factory going. A particularly ominous development is that of books written about parapsychology by authors who have never done any research— which editors take seriously enough to have reviewed, often by reviewers who also have never done any research. If everyone now writing and speaking about parapsychology were to pledge silence until he or she had produced some new data, one or two editors might lose their jobs, and a one-day meeting would amply suffice to exchange information about new results deserving attention. This austerity could also save the expense of meeting places, because the few productive investigators could assemble without crowding in the libraries of either the SPR or the ASPR.

The illusion that parapsychology is a discipline of science has been used as a license for claiming expertise in a wide variety of scientific disciplines on which parapsychology seems to touch. This has provided the spectacle of parapsychologists writing as if with authority about everything from shamanism through nuclear physics to psychopathology. Specialism has its evils, but they are not greater than a false pretense of specialized knowledge that ignores what real experts in a field have learned. Such ignorance can only drive away these qualified persons whose assistance we desperately need.

The concept of parapsychology also seems to encourage facileness and the belief that anyone ought to be able to do it easily. Science certainly has its fashions, but one cannot find in its recognized disciplines the sort of trendiness and rushing from one type of experiment or inquiry to another that occurs too often in parapsychology. Perhaps Blackmore (1986) provides another extreme example; but according to her own account, she

undertook seven different projects in parapsychology in less than 10 years (not counting time taken to examine and criticize the work of some others in the field). No doubt Blackmore never intended at the outset to be a dilettante, and she is less to be deplored than some of the more experienced supervisors and parapsychologists she met along the way. Not a single one of them told her—at least if they did it is not in her record—that one can accomplish nothing valuable in science without at least 5 and probably 10 or 15 years of devoted application to a single problem. If she had gone to a professor of physics and proposed by trying seven projects in 10 years she hoped to learn whether there was anything to physics, she would have been laughed out of the office.

The designation of parapsychology as a separate discipline has brought still other burdens on psychical research. The blurred definition of parapsychology has made it an easy target for the admittedly often unfair sniping of critics. To call oneself a parapsychologist makes one culpable, in their view, for all the extravagant claims that surround the few substantial reports in the field and for all the piles of misleading books that far outsell the handful of scholarly ones. I believe that without the claims implied in the founding of the Parapsychological Association, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) would never have been founded. The first group virtually invited the second into existence. (I do not think members of the CSICOP group would ever admit this, and yet their message to the general public says there is no need to distinguish parapsychologists from palmists and astrologers.) This kind of unjust damning by association was much less likely to occur when psychical researchers did their research from bases within recognized scientific disciplines. A physicist interested in paranormal metal-bending cannot be easily blamed for the tricks of a stage "mentalist," but someone called a parapsychologist may be. The claim to be an expert concerning any paranormal phenomena (implicit in the title parapsychologist) invites allegations of responsibility for everything done by others giving themselves the same title. The suffix -logy implies a body of agreed-upon knowledge and a more or less coherent embracing theory; parapsychology cannot provide either of these,4 and its pretentiousness is easily assailed and even ridiculed. The term pseudoscientist is a pejorative label that we all deplore. However, if parapsychology is, as I now believe, a pseudodiscipline, then its adherents can hardly avoid being called pseudoscientists.

Ironically, whereas some critics judge parapsychology to be nothing but superstition masquerading as science, others accuse its practitioners of

³ Of which this essay is one.

⁴ It may be said, justly I think, that psychology also has no "agreed-upon knowledge and a more or less coherent embracing theory." However, psychology has firm attachments to the neurosciences. The unprospering but persisting study of paranormal phenomena provides one of the few obstacles that are preventing a complete absorption of psychology by the neurosciences.

profitless concern with the trivial, of ignoring the major phenomena that should interest psychical researchers while conducting arid experimental research that produces results of only marginal significance, both statistically and heuristically (Braude, 1986; LeShan, 1987). The grim determination of some parapsychologists to be seen as "scientific," whatever the cost, may have suppressed the very phenomena they claim to be studying (White, 1985).

This curious alliance of the jelly-soft with the flint-hard—both claiming to represent parapsychology—is a case of *les extrêmes se touchent*. However, such a coalition cannot long endure, if only because both wings are isolated from the small residue of psychical research as it once was and may again become. This, however, is not all that parapsychology is isolated from.

The price of fraternity with members of one small group has been isolation from the members of other larger and more important groups. Investigators of paranormal phenomena hope and expect that eventually the phenomena they study will become assimilated within branches of science already recognized. However, this can only happen with the active cooperation of scientists in existing disciplines, and the attempt to create a new discipline claiming paranormal phenomena for its province seems strangely contradictory to the professed goal of parapsychologists. It is self-defeating to erect a fence that separates one from the very persons one hopes to join. Scientists studying paranormal phenomena need contacts with leaders of established branches of science and with the young scientists who will become the leaders in the future. These leaders and future leaders all have (or will have) positions in research universities, but most present-day parapsychologists do not. For example, in 1986 only 20% of the members of the Parapsychological Association had a faculty appointment in a college or university; some others were attached to private foundations, but most seemed to be based in their own homes. So was Charles Darwin, but he lived in the nineteenth century, and we are near the end of the twentieth.

Scientists are not averse to recognizing new disciplines; in the nine-teenth century, psychology developed out of philosophy, and anthropology emerged from folklore and travelers' tales. Within our century and a little before, the new fields of genetics, biochemistry, radiology, molecular biology, and psychology itself have all received recognition. However, during this same time phrenology, homeopathy, and psychoanalysis have been refused recognition and have withered. Which will be the fate of parapsychology? I see in parapsychology some of the same symptoms that, to discerning persons, foretold the demise of the three last-mentioned subjects: unwarranted claims of accomplishment, use of an arcane jargon, scholastic working over of old data without producing new evidence, commentaries greatly outnumbering reports of new research, and (worst of all) loss of contact with other scientists.

My strictures are general, and enough exceptions exist among parapsy-

chologists so that many may correctly think: "He cannot be talking about me." Perhaps not, but one must be prepared to be judged by the company one keeps, however irrational such judgment may be. I predict that few or no new recruits for the investigation of paranormal phenomena will undertake this research under the heading of parapsychology. They will not be willing to give up their identification with an established discipline for one as vacuous as parapsychology now appears to be.

However, I do not think the study of these phenomena will cease with the phase called parapsychology. I expect it to flourish again, but when it does, it will do so within recognized scientific disciplines. In the future that I foresee, the new investigators with the new ideas that we so badly need will come from among well-trained scientists of recognized disciplines—established in faculty positions of research universities—whose curiosity will arouse their interest in the study of paranormal phenomena. In saying this I am only repeating what McDougall stated many years ago (in 1926), when he insisted that psychical research is "no field for the casual amateur; for the man who merely wishes to take a rapid glance at the phenomena and thereupon form his own conclusions; It is a field of research which at every step demands in the highest degree the scientific spirit and all round scientific training and knowledge" (McDougall, 1967, p. 71). Many years later, McConnell (1974) gave the same advice when he wrote: "In science, as in every other endeavor . . . what is needed are the old-fashioned attributes of thorough mastery of self and subject, enough intelligence, and endless effort" (p. 175). In 1972, Gertrude Schmeidler included a similar message in a sage little article, which I often mail to students who write to me asking about courses in parapsychology or how they can "go into parapsychology." Schmeidler advised them to forget about working in parapsychology until after they had first qualified themselves fully in some established discipline of science.

In conclusion, I should like to add a few autobiographical remarks that will show me to be less changeful than some readers may think I have been. At the time when our research unit was founded at the University of Virginia (Stevenson, 1969), I did not wish it to be called a Division of Parapsychology. I foresaw (normally—I have never claimed to have paranormal powers) that the designation of parapsychology would isolate me and associates working with me from other scientists. This, it seemed, was precisely what those adversarial colleagues who insisted on our unit being identified with the word parapsychology wished to achieve; however, in those days I thought it was more important to get on with the research than to quarrel about names, and so I yielded. The succeeding years have increased my earlier conviction about the harmful implications of the word parapsychology, and in 1987 new colleagues at the University whole-heartedly agreed when I asked to change the name of our unit to Division of Personality Studies. (This is the name I had wished it to have 18 years earlier.)

This change of name seemed desirable to further the rapprochement of

our research with that of scientists in psychiatry and other disciplines of medicine. It certainly implies no loss of nerve on my part. Unlike some persons who have at one time or another called themselves parapsychologists and then become skeptical about paranormal phenomena, I remain fully confident in the reality of some paranormal experiences, and more than ever convinced about the importance of their careful investigation. At the University of Virginia we have not changed our research, but by changing the name under which we conduct it we hope to lose the burden of associations that, in my view, has made the field less and less attractive to other scientists. I can already see signs of an increased interest in paranormal phenomena on the part of some other scientists who are not calling themselves parapsychologists. In taking leave of parapsychology, I salute these new scientists who may accomplish what it has failed to do—bring the study of paranormal phenomena into the main body of science.

To return to the point of my beginning, I do not mean to attribute all the troubles of psychical research to the idea of parapsychology as a separate branch of science. However, if I am right in identifying poor recruitment of new, well-qualified scientists into the field as one of those troubles, then I am also right in raising the question of whether the connotations of parapsychology have now more a repelling than an inviting effect on scientists who may consider joining our endeavors.

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Guest Editorial