

WHAT MIGHT PARAPSYCHOLOGY CONTRIBUTE TO OUR VIEW OF THE WORLD?

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Suppose that paranormal phenomena really exist. Telepathy, precognition, psychokinesis, clairvoyance, and communication with the dead actually take place. In this article, Timothy Sprigge asks to what extent this would impact on our world view. In particular, how would it affect science, philosophy and religion?

Introductory

In his *Lectures on Psychological Research* (London: Routledge, 1962, pp. 3-4) C.D. Broad offered a definition of psychical research. According to this an *ostensibly* paranormal phenomenon is one which at least appears to conflict with one or more of certain *basic limiting principles*, commonly accepted in industrialised societies, as to what is possible, while a *genuinely* paranormal phenomenon would be one which actually conflicts with one or more of them. And psychical research is the investigation of such ostensibly paranormal phenomena with a view of explaining them, whether as genuine or otherwise. This can still stand, I believe, as a reasonable definition of psychical research, or 'parapsychology' (the preferred term today).

As examples of such principles Broad lists (somewhat differently phrased) the following four:

1. The mental states of other persons can only be known via perceptual awareness of their publicly perceivable physical behaviour or productions.
2. Facts about the future can only be known through inductive inference from the past.
3. A person can only make changes in the external physical world through moving his own body in certain ways.

4. A dead person has either ceased to exist or, if he still exists in some other realm, he can no longer communicate with those still living.

Elsewhere (*Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research*, London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1953, pp. 9-12) he lists several more, including:

5. First hand non-inferential knowledge of physical facts about physical things can only be obtained through perceiving them in a standard way.

The phenomena which appear to flout these principles are: telepathy; precognition; psychokinesis; communication with the dead and clairvoyance. These, it may be noted, are all cases of a human being knowing or doing something in a non-standard way. Broad's complete list covers other sorts of case too, but I shall limit my discussion to these.

Personally I am quite open-minded as to whether any of these ostensibly paranormal phenomena are genuine. My interest here is how much this matters from the point of view of (A) science, (B) philosophy and (C) religion.

A. Science

From the point of view of science it seems to me that it matters a good deal whether there are veridical cases of such ostensibly paranormal phenomena. For each of them would be something which could not be explained by science as it presently stands. Therefore it must either be the task of some branch of science to explain them or an admission which scientists should make that there are some phenomena which are scientifically inexplicable and that therefore the concern of science is only with some of the things which happen in the world, not all of them.

My broad conclusion is that the genuineness of any such paranormal phenomena is of scientific importance.

B. Philosophy

I shall approach the question of its relevance to philosophy by asking whether there are philosophical views which might be favoured or disfavoured by decisive evidence that some of these phenomena are veridical. The philosophical views of which this seems truest are:

1. Materialism in general
2. Materialist views of the human mind
3. Certain views on personal identity
4. Mind/body (or “mind/brain”) dualism

1. Materialism in general

By materialism I understand the view that every individual thing which exists is physical, that is, something which fills out a bit of space and that each such thing possesses only physical properties, which are the way in which it fills out such a bit of space (or causal powers to make physical changes in itself or in other physical things) or logical derivatives of such. (If there are other physical things they must answer to a description not too far from this.) As for space itself, we must allow the materialist the luxury of it as an extra quasi-physical thing or as constituted by the physical relationships known as ‘spatial’.

I qualify this by saying that the materialist may, if he is so inclined, allow also for the existence of such so-called abstract objects as numbers, and limit his materialism to so-called concrete objects. And perhaps (though there are problems for him here) he may be allowed to believe that there may be more than one space, so that there are physical things in no spatial relations to those with which we are acquainted.

I suggest that this very general sort of materialism is not logically incompatible with the reality of any of these ostensibly paranormal phenomena. On the other hand the reasons which more intellectual materialists today are likely to have for being materialists are threatened by some of them.

Telepathy, clairvoyance and psychokinesis if they occur, can be regarded as purely physical occurrences, though they depend upon forms of interaction between physical things which may require recognition of laws of nature not yet recognized by modern science. Telepathy may be regarded as a way in which brains can act on one another, psychokinesis as a way in which brains can act directly on things outside the physical organism, clairvoyance as some peculiar perceptual power of certain organisms. Precognition is more problematic but I would not rule out the possibility of its being conceived as somehow physical.

It may seem obvious that a materialist could not believe in a life after death, but there have been materialists who did so without logical incoherence. For example there are materialistic 'mortalists' who think that God puts atoms together at the last judgement in such a way as to reconstitute each of the dead anew.

Mortalism, however, is incompatible with communication with the dead since these have not as yet been reconstituted. But some spiritualists seem to believe that God reconstitutes us immediately after death in another space which can affect things in our space in a manner which allows communication. This may be different from the materialism of any distinguished philosopher but it still rests on an essentially materialist conception of what it is to be.

But what of God himself? Does not materialism rule out his existence? Well, God himself has been conceived of by some as a physical being. But if he is allowed to exist as pure non-physical spirit then one is still essentially a materialist if one thinks that everything which he created is physical.

All in all, if materialism can provide an adequate account (as I believe it cannot) of ordinary every day occurrences, I do not see why it should not cope as well with a world in which paranormal events occur, and even one in which we survive death and can communicate with the living.

Certainly if materialism is associated with a view that nothing occurs in the world which only rather modest advances

in modern science could explain then these paranormal phenomena would indeed give some materialists grounds to think again. Still, upon the whole what really grips the materialist is a sense of what it is really *to be* and that he cannot, or thinks that he cannot, conceive of anything which is not some kind of object stretched out in space.

2. Materialist conceptions of mind

I turn now to the more specific materialist view that a person's mind is simply his brain, or certain processes going on within it, or perhaps something like a computer programme for which it provides (the rather soft!) hardware.

I join with the many philosophers who have repudiated this view on such grounds as that to know or believe that an individual is conscious is to believe something more than, and other than, any physical facts about his brain. Two people might agree on all physical facts about the brain of a fish including all the processes or programmes operative in it, and one of them think that the fish was conscious and the other not. Both these positions are logically coherent however foolish we may think one of them. Then there is the common view that someone born totally deaf could know all physical facts about sound (both within the brain and outside it) and yet not know what sound was like as something actually experienced. From this it follows that facts about conscious experience are not facts about anything going on physically, that is, are facts different from the totality of what is going on in a particular part of space (as the materialist must conceive it). There are counter-arguments to this, but I do not think they are very good ones.

If this is right, purely materialist conceptions of mind are so evidently false that paranormal phenomena could add nothing important to their refutation. They could indeed threaten some typical materialist view of mind by loosening its relation to the brain. But what replaced the mind-brain identity thesis would still probably be pretty materialistic for the true philosophical materialist, since his outlook turns really on his inability to conceive (at least explicitly) of any

kind of existence other than that of somehow filling out a part of space (or a space). It is this basic conception of what it is *to be* which is at the bottom of all materialism and naturally (and not unreasonably) the brain presents itself as the most likely (but not the only possible) thing possessing such being with which mind can be identified.

I conclude that the philosophical case against materialism and most specifically about a materialist view of mind is so compelling that it has no need to look to paranormal phenomena to strengthen it. On the other hand I agree that some paranormal phenomena (if genuine) might cause such a shake up in his beliefs that there is no knowing what the materialist might conclude.

However that may be, insofar as someone thinks that he has made out a good case for materialism it is doubtful how far the occurrence of paranormal phenomena of this kind should trouble his basic stance. This seems to me so at least of telepathy, psychokinesis, clairvoyance and communication with the dead.

As for precognition, that is a much more difficult issue. If it is genuine it requires a readjustment in common conceptions of time, but I would not rule out a materialist account of it no worse than materialist accounts are of matters of every day life. However, I suspect that the best explanation of it would be of an idealist nature (into which I cannot enter here).

3. Views on personal identity

Some think that where materialism is weakest is in the question of personal identity, that is, what is it for a person B existing at a certain time to be the same person as a person A existing at an earlier time.

There are three main theories of personal identity.

(i) First, there is the view that the identity is that of a spiritual substance which exists as one and the same at different times. Philosophical materialists will dismiss such a view as vacuous, and though from a pretty different standpoint so do I. If it is vacuous the theory can neither be as-

sisted nor hindered by any phenomena at all, normal or paranormal.

(ii) The most obvious view of personal identity for a materialist to take is that the identity of a person across time is the same as the identity across time of the relevant human organism. This view is certainly threatened by evidence of survival, though a mortalist or a spiritualist might stretch the notion of the sameness of an organism across time to cover it.

In any case the devotee of this view of personal identity might just obstinately stick to it and say that whatever connection there may be between B and A they cannot be the same person. For a purely conceptual claim cannot be strictly falsified by empirical facts, however odd. Nonetheless it may appear that the concepts a philosopher is working with are just not convenient for thinking about reality as it actually is, and, in this sense, may be empirically refuted. Nonetheless, granted that an adequate concept of something must allow for all logical possibilities, the mere fact that it could not deal adequately with certain abnormal phenomena, if they occurred, is enough to show that it is not dealing satisfactorily with ordinary ones.

Inasmuch as they might produce a shake-up in our concepts, paranormal phenomena which it would be hard not to interpret as evidence of survival of death would have a limited philosophical relevance.

(iii) The third view of personal identity is the psychological one which holds that B is identical with A if and only if there are certain psychological relations between them. Different theorists will stress the importance of different such relations, but the ones likely to be appealed to are: strong similarity of personality, knowledge on the part of B of experience of A of a type psychologically altogether akin to memory, apparent influence on B of reinforcement positive and negative by experiences on the part of A. Insofar as there is, as there needs to be, a materialist conception of each of these psychological phenomena the materialist could regard them as constitutive of personal identity across time.

He would, or does, of course, typically think that these relations hold in virtue of an identity of organism or brain, but he might still think that it is they, not their basis in this physical identity, which constitutes the personal identity. If they did hold without any such basis it would not then be the materialist's conception of personal identity which was threatened but his materialism.

For myself I believe in a psychological view of personal identity and do not think that it is necessarily grounded in a physical identity. Therefore I have no strong philosophical objection to the notion of personal survival of death. Still, I am not by any means convinced that we do survive. And even if my main philosophical outlook is independent of whether or not there is a life after death, it would be so striking a fact if there really did seem to be evidence of it, that it would greatly affect anyone's outlook on life, and influence what in a broader sense might be called his philosophy.

The main objection to a psychological conception of personal identity is that made by believers in a spiritual substance, namely that it seems to allow for personal identity to be a matter of more or less. This to such thinkers seems absurd. An experience occurring in the future is and must be either definitely mine or another's.

On behalf of the psychological theory which I personally support I respond as follows.

Our consciousness as it continues from moment to moment is often called a stream of consciousness, because in some metaphorical sense the mental states which we live through seem just to flow one into another. During any period of continued wakefulness it seems pointless to worry about what makes us the same person because the thought of each moment takes over from that of the previous moment while normally there is a not dissimilar, though less optional, flow of one perception of surrounding things to another, similarly with the feel of our own actions. And in general when we wake up after sleep a not altogether dissimilar

continuity seems to hold. It is this flowing of one moment of consciousness into the next which seems the most fundamental factor in personal identity, to which memory, personality and so forth are really rather secondary. And the most straightforward type of continuation after death would be if the experience were much like that of waking after sleep. But in case this is not there the other psychological factors come in.

Now I am inclined to think that streams of consciousness can merge with one another and bifurcate. However, it is just possible that in fact there is something about streams of consciousness which makes this impossible, and it is only the metaphor of a stream which makes us think otherwise. If there is any sense to the postulation of necessarily distinct mental substances it must, I suggest, only be as a way of stressing this impossibility, if that is what it is.

All in all, paranormal phenomena suggesting that we survive do not of themselves favour one philosophical view of personal identity rather than another. They only rule out what can be ruled out independently. But of course they would make a vast difference to the general *Weltanschauung* of many of us.

4. Mind/body dualism

A word must be said about mind/body dualism. For any clear headed person who thinks that the physical is not of itself really somehow mental, dualism is compulsory. For there certainly is something mental, and if there is also something non-mental and the two are related some kind of dualism is compulsory. This case for dualism is so strong that it does not need support from parapsychology. But since I personally think that the physical is itself somehow mental (I shall not elaborate on this) a strictly dualist view is neither called for nor possible. At most what is called for is some account of how the mental associated with the inanimate and apparently non-sentient physical relates to that which involves mind. But for anyone who can only believe in what

is spread out in some publicly accessible way in space, dualism is, of course, impossible.

What stands in the way of dualism or the kind of panpsychic idealism which I believe to be the truth is probably the apparently unimaginable nature of the mental, which makes people conceive of it as a kind of mysterious spooky substance. But such a reality would be thoroughly physical. If you want to imagine the mental you must imagine someone's state of mind (in which a presented physical environment is usually a main feature) or something generically akin to such a state. And such a reality cannot possibly be conceived as a component within a physical world such as perception presents us with.

So much for the relevance of paranormal phenomena to philosophy. I now turn to its relevance for religion.

C. Religion

It has been an important part of most religions that they postulate some form of survival after death. Now paranormal phenomena could not point to the non-existence of survival. But conceivably they might point to the existence of survival, if we conceive this psychologically as I think that we should. Would this be something important for religion?

Presumably it would favour religion of the more popular sort. However, personally I believe that religion in the best sense of the word consists in symbolic techniques which make us feel a certain oneness with the whole of creation, a feeling which, so long as it lasts, reduces our normal selfishness. And the oneness which is felt, if it is a fact, is a fact which neither depends on nor would be supported by phenomena which suggest that we personally continue after death. For that reason I think that paranormal phenomena suggesting survival are more relevant to what might be called vulgar religion than to a deeper form of religion.

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