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The bounds of reason

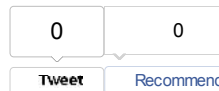
NICHOLAS HUMPHREY 20TH JANUARY 1996 — ISSUE 4

Belief in the paranormal is commonplace, even among hard-headed rationalists. But Nicholas Humphrey says there is no point weighing the evidence for and against miracles, clairvoyance or spoon-bending. Such things are logically impossible... and a good thing too

Chatto and Windus in London have taken it calmly. But my New York publishers are more disturbed. They are, they say, “concerned about the market.” The book I have just handed over to them seems certain to offend. Believers will hate it because... well, because they are believers. And with recent polls showing that more than half the US population believe that human beings have psychic powers, while 95 per cent believe in God and 72 per cent in angels, I must agree that a book that sets out to discredit all kinds of supernatural phenomena is bound to be a marketing department’s nightmare.

Worse still, sceptics will hate the book too because... well, because very few of them would want to say that anything’s impossible in principle. Even sceptics who stoutly maintain that they have yet to see any convincing evidence for the existence of paranormal phenomena will mostly not want to rule out that someday, somewhere, the evidence might be forthcoming. Sceptics, indeed, often take pains to distance themselves from so-called “absolute scepticism.” TH Huxley himself, the man who coined the word agnosticism, insisted that atheism would be absurd “when the possibilities of nature are infinite.”

And yet here I am unashamedly pushing beyond the limits of what the sceptics consider decent, arguing that the possibilities of nature are not infinite. Trying to show not merely that the evidence does not support any of the paranormal claims, but that in principle it never could. Arguing, in short, that many of the things people believe



in are not just practical impossibilities but logical ones.

My American editor has reason to be worried. Faxes fly. Even if my arguments are fool proof (and she is not, of course, accepting that they are), isn't there some way I can soften the message? Could I not rewrite certain sections of the book to bring them into line with current trends, to take into account, for example, the resurgence of spirituality and angel consciousness? The idea that there is only one kind of truth-scientific or religious-is surely out of fashion these days. Doesn't post-modernism teach us that truth is relative, and that no one has the right to castigate alternative belief systems?

Anyhow-and here I think she thinks she's trumped me-what good do I imagine I am doing by writing a book that people will simply not want to read? Perhaps, in fact, a book they should not read? What about the evidence I myself have cited, that those who hold religious and supernatural beliefs are on the whole happier and mentally better adjusted than those who do not? If that is the case, why not leave them with their illusions, even if they are illusions? Wasn't it Peter Pan who said "every time a child says 'I don't believe in fairies,' a fairy dies"? Is fairy-cide something to be proud of?

I realise that my answer may seem lame. I am, I say, sorry if she feels I am being difficult and unyielding, but I am not entirely a free agent in these matters. The problem, I explain, is that I have been brought up in a certain old-fashioned way: a tradition of rationalist thinking which maintains there really is a difference between truth and falsehood and that on balance the truth, once discovered, is to be preferred, even when it hurts.

Lies, confabulations, economies with the truth, wishful distortions may have their uses in certain special circumstances. But to withhold arguments or information from people because it might undermine their faith in some comforting illusion, or to tell people that it is all right to believe whatever they like when we ourselves have reason to think that we know better, is, as a general rule, not only intellectually dishonest, but patronising.

Fairies have nothing to do with it. The point of my book is not to undermine a child's belief in Father Christmas. It is about less innocuous issues; the wholesale acceptance of, say, the reality of biblical miracles, spoon-bending, trance-channelling, astrological prophecy, second sight, reincarnation, or the effectiveness of prayer. The fact is that countless people's lives have been and still are being changed by their belief in the paranormality of these phenomena. If, as I am arguing, the premise of paranormality has to be false, then the beliefs are baseless and the life changes unwarranted.

Not that I am going to let fairies off the hook entirely. For the book also deals with smaller but more widely experienced encounters with the seemingly paranormal: the kinds of thing which have happened to us all-telephones which ring just as we are thinking of the caller, books which fall open at exactly the page we want, dreams which seem to look into the future. Many of us assume almost casually that such things confirm the existence of human psychic powers. If this assumption has to be nonsensical, we are, to say the least, exposing ourselves to disappointment.

But hold on, my editor is saying: isn't this "has to be nonsensical" just the same old science-knows-best attitude which has made scientific dogmatism look foolish in the past? Surely we know better than to think that we already know all there is to know about the world we live in. Who's to say that there may not be extra dimensions still to be discovered, unimagined by science as it now stands? In a hundred years time, maybe, people will realise that phenomena which now seem supernatural are as much a part of nature as anything else. The paranormal will be seen as being, in reality, quite normal.

no, i don't think so. The argument isn't just about what is or is not acceptable to science. I accept that the world is a weird place, and we should probably remain open-minded about what is empirically possible. But my objections to the existence of miracles are not so much empirical as philosophical, not so much based on what could conceivably be true at the level of fact, as based on what could be true at the level of ideas. I am not saying-

at least not always-that the events people consider paranormal could not have taken place at all. Maybe they did take place as stated, maybe they did not. What I am saying, however, is that even if the events did take place, they cannot have been the kinds of events people have taken them to be. In particular, they cannot have had the paranormal causal structure being ascribed to them. Why? Because all explanations in terms of those supposed paranormal causes can be shown to break the rules of explanation. A curious example in my book nicely illustrates the nature of the problem. It isn't a typical example of the paranormal genre (most parapsychologists would probably disown it), but it brings the issues to the fore. Let's go through it in an abbreviated version.

It has long been claimed (although, interestingly enough, it is not clear how it first came to be claimed) that the birth of William Shakespeare is encoded in the Book of Psalms. The basis of the claim goes as follows. First, the letters of Shakespeare's name, when rearranged, seem to spell a message: "Here was I, like a psalm." Second, Shakespeare was born on April 23rd 1564, and was therefore in the 46th year of his life when the King James Version of the Bible was published in 1610-and the number 46 turns up in other contexts related to him. Perhaps, therefore, the 46th Psalm will hold some special significance for Shakespeare? Indeed: if we turn to the 46th Psalm and count forward to the 46th word, the word is "shake"; and if we then count back to the 46th word from the end the word is "spear".

The bare facts of this case are indisputable. But the question is: what kind of explanatory story could account for them? Are we to suppose that Shakespeare's birth could somehow have been causally responsible for those particular words appearing in those positions in that psalm? Or, vice versa, that the words of the psalm could somehow have been responsible for the birth of a boy called William Shakespeare? Perhaps neither sounds in any way like a real possibility. In fact, both might seem equally implausible. Not so, however: for one of the alternatives actually makes reasonable sense.

Shakespeare was already a famous figure on the literary scene when the English translation of the Bible was being made in London. He would probably have been a friend of one or more of the translators; it is not impossible that he himself might have been asked to advise on the translation-especially when it came to the richly poetic language of the psalms. We know that Shakespeare and his fellow poets loved word play and riddles, and frequently teased their readers with cryptic references. So it is by no means inconceivable that someone could have deliberately planted the two key words in the 46th Psalm. It might have been done precisely to celebrate the great man's birthday.

Thus the first explanation, that Shakespeare's birth was in some way responsible for the words of the psalm, is not only logically possible but even rather plausible. By contrast, however, the alternative explanation, that the words in the psalm were somehow responsible for Shakespeare's birth, runs up against a series of deep theoretical objections.

To begin with, there is the small point that, because William Shakespeare's birth occurred earlier in time than the biblical translation, this explanation would have to involve some kind of backward causation-which, if not strictly impossible in principle, none the less quickly leads to all sorts of logical absurdities. But besides this-and more decisive-there is the point that this explanation promises, at an informational level, much more than it can deliver: the problem of what we might call "inadequate prescriptive power."

The problem arises when, as here, too little a cause is made responsible for too large an effect-when a relatively simple event (the text of a psalm) is suggested as the cause of a relatively rich and complex event (the birth of a baby called William to Master Shakespeare in 1564). The reason this presents so great a difficulty is that while it is indeed logically possible for a simple event to trigger a complex one, it is not possible for a simple event to prescribe the content of a complex one. While you can, for example, use a single toss of a coin to set a significant train of events in motion, you clearly cannot

use a single toss to specify which of a thousand different outcomes will result. You cannot- logically-get an informationally richer message out than you put in.

Now my argument is that it is precisely on this test of “prescriptive sufficiency” that the paranormal explanations given for seemingly miraculous phenomena in general fall apart. Not only the obviously problematic ones, such as Jesus bringing a dead man back to life, but the simpler ones too, such as Uri Geller mending a watch over the telephone or me dreaming the winner of the Derby. In fact, even with the most common examples of supposed extra sensory perception, such as me being able to guess what number my friend in the next room is thinking of, the paranormal explanation-that my friend’s thought is directly causing me to guess the number-can be shown to be logically unviable: for it is easy to show that the information initially contained in my friend’s thought cannot possibly be sufficient to give rise to the image of the number in my brain.

but tut, tut-I can hear my American editor’s just concealed frustration-where is this logic-chopping leading? Am I saying that in principle the game is over? Are all those people who have been resting their hopes on an alternative reality going to be told that the picture is in reality entirely black? Yes.

Jerry Fodor, the philosopher, has made the point more gently than I. “When you keep putting questions to Nature,” he wrote, “and Nature keeps saying ‘no,’ it is not unreasonable to suppose that somewhere among the things you believe there is something that isn’t true.”

Dostoevsky, during his travels in Europe, saw in a Basel church Holbein’s brutally natural painting of the Dead Christ, showing the body of the Saviour reduced to a gangrenous slab of meat upon a table. In his novel *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin confronts a reproduction of the picture in a friend’s house. “That picture... that picture!” Myshkin cries, “Why, some people might lose their faith by looking at that picture?” Then, later in the novel, Myshkin’s alter ego, Ippolit, continues: “As one looks at the body of this tortured man, one cannot help asking the peculiar and interesting question: if the laws of nature are

so powerful, how can they be overcome? How can they be overcome when even He did not conquer them, He who overcame nature during His lifetime and whom nature obeyed?... Looking at that picture, you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable and dumb beast, or... as some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces and swallowed up impassively and unfeelingly-a great and price-less Being, a Being worth the whole of nature and all its laws.”

Nature as some implacable and dumb beast... a huge and senseless engine. Here is what has been at issue all along. Nature is the enemy. What the paranormal has always seemed to promise people is that we can vanquish this dumb beast of natural law. What the emptiness of this premise eventually forces us to recognise is that, when we do treat Nature as the enemy and seek to conquer her, Nature inevitably has the last depressing word: “No.”

You put the question to Nature: “Can a man have godly powers?” and Nature says-as only she knows how-”No, a man can have only the powers of an embodied mortal human being.” You want the message of the book to be more positive? Well, in the end maybe it is. For in the last chapter I leave the reader to consider this quite different possibility: that Nature-Mother Nature-is not in reality the enemy but the best ally we could possibly have. That the world we know and everything we value in it has come into being because of and not despite the fact that the laws of nature are as they are. What is more, that it may have been an essential condition of the evolution of life on earth that these laws preclude the miracles that people imagine would be so desirable: action at a distance, thought transfer, survival of the mind after death. That dumb beast-Nature and her laws-is actually something of a beauty.

Maybe you have heard of the so-called “anthropic principle.” This is the idea that the laws of physics in our world are as they are because if they weren’t as they are, this planet wouldn’t be the kind of place on which human beings could exist. Adjust the laws ever so little and it

would all go wrong: the world would expand too fast or too slowly, or become too hot or too cold; and we humans would not be here to seek the meaning of it.

Suppose, now, that it is a similar story with the paranormal. Suppose that I can show that if the laws which govern relations between mind and body were to be adjusted so as to admit paranormal phenomena, this too would have disastrous consequences for human beings, compromising their individuality and undermining the basis of cultural and biological progress. Won't that make you feel better about the "bad news"?

My editor is not reconciled. Charming, she says. Who'd be an editor? You can plead, cajole, and offer to re-write, but in the end you have little redress against the author who stands fast. Except when it come to deciding on the title. Soul Searching doesn't carry quite the right connotations for the American public. Why don't we call it Leaps of Faith?

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