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EDITORIAL

PARAPSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC RECOGNITION

AS OF 1952, parapsychology has definitely failed to impress the majority of American psychologists. There have been various indications of this general lack of recognition from time to time, but now, if we take Dr. Warner's survey (published in this issue) as representative, we cannot possibly escape the fact. Even when the question of the occurrence of ESP is broadened, as it was in the Warner questionnaire, to the extent of asking whether ESP is "a likely possibility," only one psychologist in six on the average is prepared to agree. What is especially sobering is the fact that according to Warner's comparison with his survey of fourteen years ago, this percentage of 16.6 is little more than 8 percent above what it was for the same question in 1938. When we consider along with this the fact that the greatest bulk of the best controlled work in ESP has been done during the fourteen years between surveys, we are forced to conclude that something must be wrong, quite apart from the evidence itself.

Indeed, it can almost be concluded, on the strength of Warner's figures, that this matter of acceptance is not a question of the evidence. This conclusion would have such grave implications regarding a large body of professional scientific men that it ought not to be made without due caution. But we do know of certain individuals, some of them capable scientists in other respects, who have been frank to say that no amount of evidence could convince them of the occurrence of ESP. One of these, a psychologist and friend who

has actually witnessed a successful ESP performance under conditions he himself laid down for the subject, has told us of his reply to a question put to him by another scientist as to what he thought of the case for ESP. "If it were on any other issue, one-tenth of the evidence reported would have been enough to convince me. As it is, ten times that amount would not do it."

From the Warner report we now see that this was not just an isolated case. According to the survey, although five out of six psychologists do not recognize ESP as a likely possibility, *only a little over an average of one in six claim to have based their opinions on any acquaintance with the scientific reports!* Seventeen percent in both surveys even admitted to having reached their opinions on the basis of hearsay. But the really significant revelation, to our judgment, is the fact that *approximately 20 percent in both surveys put on the record that they reached their conclusions entirely on a priori grounds;* they had their minds already made up on the question in advance. They admitted they were not judging the case by the evidence. (Let us pause to remind ourselves that these are, for the most part, university scientists, the professionally trained men and women who are responsible for research and instruction here in America in the field of psychology, the science that should be, and doubtless will come to be, the greatest of all in its importance to mankind.)

But even as we in parapsychology concede this failure to gain acceptance of our findings by the profession most concerned, we must face the situation squarely and learn what we can from it. A well-interpreted failure can be of positive value. Let us then examine the possible interpretations. To take first the easiest way out, we could put the entire responsibility on the psychologists themselves and indict all those who will not look at the evidence of psi as simply not being good scientists. We might say they are not really open-minded to new experimental facts, especially if those facts are disturbing; that they prefer a complacent peace of mind to any upsetting knowledge of mind; and that they are unable to decide professional issues with proper scientific detachment. But while there might be a great deal of truth in such an indictment, an objective view of the situa-

tion would not, we believe, justify it as a balanced and complete analysis.

We could, on the other hand, put the principal blame on the workers in our own field. Since the findings in parapsychology are bound to be revolutionary if accepted, the psi investigator is naturally inclined to picture their significance in strong terms. The very intensity of the explorer's interest may easily lead him to appear to exaggerate the importance of his discoveries. Such an attitude may put the average psychologist on the defensive and tend to make recognition impossible. This second interpretation, like the first, could be rated as not entirely wrong but, again, we are confident it does not represent a fair and adequate picture of the situation. So let us try a third.

The beginning of the explanation lies, we believe, in the obvious fact that psychologists constitute a group of highly specialized professional men and women who are already intensely preoccupied with an area of absorbing problems; their work allows them little time to go probing into all the frontier problems of the enormously expanded field represented by psychology today. (For that matter, very few if any of the workers in parapsychology are keeping up with all the advances in the other psychological specialties.) Moreover, these Fellows of the American Psychological Association who responded to Professor Warner's questionnaire are mostly mature, settled men who may no longer be keenly looking for a new approach to the question of the nature of man; they are, perhaps, somewhat resigned, if not attached, to their own working philosophies of human nature.

Now, we are all more or less guided by some sort of general working philosophy. It is true of scientists in every field. Psychologists are dominated, in a major way, by a working philosophy derived from the physical sciences. They are especially sensitive to anything that threatens to tie up their newly developing science to its older relationships with the occult, mystical, or supernatural. In the face of claims that even so much as suggest a throwback to these bygone associations with superstition, the psychologist puts up his maximum resistance and clings tenaciously to the physicalistic formulations that make up his guiding philosophy.

There is probably no clearer revelation of this working philosophy and its effect on American psychology than that given in the paragraph quoted from Dr. D. O. Hebb on the back cover of our March issue this year. In it Dr. Hebb, too, rejected the case for ESP but conceded that on almost any other issue the evidence would be convincing. "We are," he went on to say, "still trying to find our way out of the magic woods of animism where psychology began historically, and we cannot give up the talisman of a knowledge of material processes." In other words, before ESP can be accepted it will be necessary to find a materialistic explanation of it.

Dr. Hebb is right, we think, in his stand that psychology cannot accept ESP and still hold to a physicalistic philosophy of man. If he is representative of his profession, our quarrel, then, is with the psychologist's philosophy; and psychology's difficulty over ESP is concerned not with the evidence—neither its amount nor its quality—but with its implication for his philosophy. The question, therefore, is whether American psychology is to be first of all a philosophy or whether it is ready yet to be a science. A philosophical position, as Dr. Hebb frankly indicates, determines whether or not empirical findings are acceptable. In a full-fledged science it is supposedly the experimental findings that determine the generalizations to be made, even the very philosophy ultimately reached. These considerations are elementary to science.

Let us turn now to the parapsychologists and their contribution to this failure to win acceptance. If we can generalize about so small a group of necessarily highly individualistic explorers we can, in retrospect, recognize where parapsychology's trouble with psychology began and even how it may conceivably have been avoided. Perhaps the worst thing that was done was to allow the psi research to become associated with psychology's very worst bogey—dualism. When parapsychologists brought in findings that physics could not explain, they *could* as well have stressed the equally true and equally important *unitary* aspect of their nature and emphasized the *integration* of psi processes within the whole of personality and nature. The work *might* have been presented, we now see, as simply a further extension of man's known psychophysical adaptation to his environment, based, of course, on other still unknown principles that have

already been acknowledged. In short, psi workers need not have tried to upset the philosophical applecart of contemporary psychology. It was not necessary to go so far in pushing the implications of psi; it was not the way to get consideration and win approval.

At it was, the divergent character of the psi process was hailed as the significant one. It was mainly *because* of its defiance of physical explanation that psi interested most explorers in parapsychology. For that very reason, consequently, there was no desire to appease a materialistic psychology that had given us behaviorism and had too long dominated the schools of psychology, almost excluding the science from its own proper domain of subjective experience. Here was the answer to dogmatic physicalism, in psychology or out of it. Why should parapsychologists be restrained about such a happy discovery? They may, indeed, have been tactless, but the kind of people who successfully assail old conventional barriers and overcome resistances and other difficulties to do it must be expected to be vigorous and aggressive.

What is still worse, the few isolated workers in parapsychology, struggling against odds, have been compelled to try to win support for their work from some source. They have endeavored to justify their program by calling attention as they went to the meaning their findings have for certain fields of human relations—for example, religion—emphasizing, naturally, the importance of the experimental refutation of materialism. But to the mechanistic psychologist whose philosophy tells him in advance that ESP cannot occur, such an appeal is certain to appear groundless, if not fantastic. It only reinforces his resistance to the facts.

It is hard to say at this stage whether such appeals for co-operative interest were justified or whether, in the long view, the orientation of psi research should have been directed from the start solely toward winning over the professional psychologist. But from the history of psychology one gets the impression that in the past, at least, existing philosophies and schools have always had to be bypassed by new ideas. Old concepts have not been fluid and adaptive enough to be altered by new findings that challenged their foundations.

The short experience of parapsychology seems to bear out that

impression. Its critics have almost never been won over as their criticisms have been met and answered; they have merely been silenced and have been known even to return to their outworn and already answered utterances a decade later as to an "uncompleted task."

If this analysis has been essentially correct, it will at least partially explain the failure of parapsychology to secure recognition among psychologists. In brief: that failure is mainly a consequence of the strong materialistic philosophy that dominates psychological thinking in this country, combined with the antiphysicalistic challenge which the psi explorer in his provocative interpretation of the psi results has literally hurled at the psychology profession and at scientists in general.

What are the "sweet uses" of this adversity? What jewel may we hope to find in the toad's head which this failure represents? There is certainly no good to be gained from complaints and regrets, either about the dogmatic resistance of the psychologist or the aggressive radicalism of the parapsychologist. Nor is there any point in appealing to easy escape via suppositional reflections, such as the obvious one that if sufficient control over psi can be acquired for practical application, all resistance to the findings will cease. It is not realistic to build even on such reasonably probable but still uncertain developments. For that matter, the reaction to an ever-so-demonstrable claim can be pitifully slow and reluctant. Look at the history of hypnosis.

What can be gained from a reconsideration of the forces resisting parapsychology? There is something very puzzling in the adherence of so large a body of scientists to a limiting philosophy, holding it as practically an unwritten law of nature, a guiding principle for judging all psychological truth, a framework with which all incoming ideas have to be squared. Such a situation as this in so central a science as psychology is worth having exposed in sharp relief. For this physicalistic concept of man has become an uncontested conviction; something, perhaps, that no one, not even the psychologists themselves, would have suspected without this emphasis which the challenge of psi has given it.

The great service to psychology which this physicalistic assumption has doubtless contributed is the protection it has afforded against a range of unclassifiable, unexplainable, unassimilable experiences. It is a fence on the edge of the jungle that keeps out strange creatures that the psychologists dare not let into the clearing to which they have with difficulty introduced a measure of lawfulness.

But one can now recognize some value, too, in this materialistic formulation for the significance it gives to psi phenomena. In fact, the more strongly and the longer psychologists hold to the formula, the more important they are making psi phenomena and the investigation of them. *What other scientific basis is there for challenging materialism?* What hope is there for rescuing psychology from its unhealthy retreat to the dubious shelters and delusory security of the physical sciences except through the establishment of a clear-cut, non-physical area of action, a zone of occurrences, of realities, that are not physically explainable but that are the proper domain of psychology?

May one not say, then, that the more difficult a time this "unredeemed" psychologist majority gives the parapsychologist, the more important they are making his part in the restoration of the science of human personality to its rightful preoccupation? Is not this resistant professional group—or rather, the five-sixths of it—turning the parapsychologist's humble inquiries into a mission of vaster significance? The rejection of psi is forcing him into a role of importance which the early acceptance of it would have made unnecessary, the task of saving psychology from its own self-immurement in an untested philosophy of physicalism.

The future historian of science may look back upon this basic issue between psychology and parapsychology as the culmination of nineteenth-century reaction to scientific materialism begun, among others, by the founders of the psychical research societies. This clash may represent a second stage in the Age of Enlightenment that followed the Dark Ages. Thus far the sciences have been very successfully rescuing large areas of problems from supernaturalistic interpretation. But in over-zealously barring out anything that even suggests the supernatural, they have evidently developed a too-narrow conception of the *natural*, one that equates it to the physical—

the physics of space, time, and mass. There is a need now to recover certain areas of unsolved problems from the extremes to which these tendencies have carried modern scientific thought.

Warner's survey has served to remind us not only that we have not gone very far yet toward acceptance in parapsychology, but that in the very vigor of the resistance we can now better appraise the magnitude of the job ahead of us. If we interpret aright, the issue is between psi and an all-physical view of man. Those who know the evidence for psi and can foresee the *eventual* acceptance of it can now the better appreciate its significance in turning the materialistic tide of thought because of the very immensity of the difficulties that are still to be met. In planning, then, for the longer siege, the parapsychologist will be sustained not only by the assurance of eventual victory—even Warner's survey supports that distant hope—but by the promise of its being a greater one by reason of the unexpected strength of the entrenchment of the position he is assailing.

J.B.R.