

THE END OF THE Paranormal?

A Commentary by Joseph M. Felsner

I was enjoying a late summer's walk in the quiet Maine woods, happily imbibing the spicy aroma of decaying pine needles as they softly crunched underfoot. Suddenly, out of nowhere, an odd and disturbing thought dashed through my mind like a startled deer: "The President's child is going to die tragically in an accident." It was as if I had been standing on the beach at the seashore gazing upward as one of those old biplanes was towing an advertising banner across the cloudless blue sky, touting some inane slogan like, "Eat at Joe's Seafood Loft." This strange presentiment of death floated through my conscious awareness, but did not seem to originate with me.

In the next instant, however, I found myself conjuring up an image of Bill and Hillary, grief-stricken and somber, clutching each other tightly, and walking arm in arm across the White House lawn toward a waiting helicopter.

"How terrible," I thought. "Poor Chelsea." But at least the nation will come together to console the first couple in their hour of grief.

My impression was that this tragic event was imminent. So that night around suppertime I clicked on the TV news for a few minutes. Happily, there was nothing reported about the President's child.

When I awoke the following morning, I thought of driving the two miles to the nearest variety store for a newspaper. But I soon forgot about my morbid presentiment as I ate my breakfast and prepared to take my morning constitutional. It was a hot, sticky day, and I returned from my walk sweaty and uncomfortable. I considered going for a swim in the lake right away, but for some reason decided against it. Inside the house, I found my partner,



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Cynthia, on the telephone.

"You're kidding!" I heard her exclaim as I sat down to remove my sand-filled sneakers. "You mean John-John? No, we're not watching TV. We only get one station, and it barely comes in."

I felt an eerie chill on the back of my neck as I listened to the rest of her conversation.

After Cynthia hung up the phone, she confirmed what was now painfully obvious: John F. Kennedy, Jr., and perhaps as many as five other people, were missing and presumed dead in a plane crash. Another national deathwatch for the Kennedys.

The President's child had indeed died tragically in an accident. Wrong President, of course.

There was another bizarre coincidence, a brief coda to this episode.

I had brought some work with me to the lake, a paper I had just begun writing on the "invisible threads" that connect and bind us together. Part of my notes referred to the type of spontaneous sympathy experienced by Native American tribes in their relations with nature and each other. Stuck in the folder was a photocopy of an introduction to an American Heritage book on Indians that had been published back in the early 1960s. The author of the piece was, of all people, the 35th President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Well-established and reputable psychics like Ingo Swann¹ and Robert Cracknell² insist that we are all psychic, that the powers of prognostication (among others) are simply part of the standard package of perceptual-equipment issued to every human being at birth. I believe them. My own experience confirms what they say. And lately I have heard firsthand far too many similar stories from other folks to believe that my own experience in this regard is not representative. I know I'm not special. My anomalies are your anomalies are our anomalies.

If that's so, then why do I get the funny feeling that the para-

normal is a dead duck?

By "the paranormal," of course, I don't mean paranormal experiences. I refer to what passes for the scientific study of the paranormal: parapsychology. In other words, I have had yet another presentiment of death; in this instance, the death of a discipline.

Part of the problem with trying to be scientific about the paranormal is that science only deals with individuals as instances of a general type. Statistics are God. Jung once pointed out that if you have, say, a pile of stones, a good sound scientific statement would be that "The average stone weighs 6.348 grams." That's a nice, safe generalization. But what if you were interested in obtaining a stone that weighed exactly 6.348 grams? In that case, you might be out of luck, for no such stone might actually exist in that given pile.

But when I reflected on my premonition of the death of the President's child, it became obvious to me that our anomalous perceptions are custom-tailored to the individual. Although I was only six years old when JFK was assassinated, I have vivid memories of being sent home from school that day. I watched the entire funeral. I saw Oswald get shot in the stomach. Evidently, to some part of myself that never quite dealt with that childhood trauma of death, Kennedy still *was* the President. Thus it was perfectly natural for the conscious me to jump to the wrong conclusion and misinterpret the incoming message as if it was referring to the current occupant of the Oval Office.

Our basic psychic equipment may very well be standard issue, but how each of us uses (or misuses) this magic toolbox is very much tied to the idiosyncrasies of our unique individual personalities. These unorthodox perceptions wind up telling us as much about the psychology of the knower as they do about the properties of the object known. And it may turn out to be not merely difficult, but utterly impossible, to separate the two.

The paranormal is at once a mirror reflecting the self and a window onto other dimensions of reality. When folks argue over whether, say, Atlantis was really at the South Pole or in South

America or in the Middle East, such disputes tell us as much about the beliefs, values, and prejudices of the theorizers as they do about any hypothetical or actual ur-civilization of the distant past. It may be tempting to grasp only one horn of the dilemma and let go of the other, insisting either that it's all subjective or it's all objective.

And although some quantum physicists are not uncomfortable with paradox, your average scientist demands things to be clear-cut and strictly objective. It's either a hit or a miss. When parapsychologists start babbling about "inexplicable coincidences" and "the paradoxical unity of observer and observed," the eyes of the orthodox scientist just glaze over, convinced that someone is trying to pull a fast one. The more orthodox the parapsychologist attempts to become in an effort to placate Old Father Science, the less relevant and interesting their work is to the rest of us. Alas, it's a no-win scenario.

The net result is that parapsychology on the whole is of no value to the ordinary individual who is trying to understand and cope with his or her own very real extraordinary experiences. Conversely, the individual is of no interest to the orthodox parapsychologist—unless, of course, they can reliably reproduce results at will in the laboratory. But even the best "professional" psychics have their slumps.

Perhaps it's time, then, that we all went our separate ways, and all of us inquisitive paranormal experimenter types allow "scientific" parapsychology to die a natural death—of disinterest.

But what, if anything, would take its place?
What, indeed?

If history is any guide, we are at the moment in the end-stage of a certain rather hilarious but perhaps expectable turn of events. Marx once said that whenever history tries to repeat itself (though it can never do this perfectly), the first time around it is as tragedy, the second time as farce. Scientific anomalism seems poised at the precipice of parody, ready to replay in slapstick form the cardinal episode in what Colin Wilson once fittingly dubbed, "The Strange

Case of Modern Philosophy." Just how strange, you ask?

You will recall, from your unhappy stint in Philosophy 101, the esteemed founder of modern philosophy, the precociously brilliant Frenchman René ("I think, therefore I am") Descartes. Standing amidst the ruins of the authoritarian Medieval Catholic faith, René was casting desperately about, trying to find some new method of achieving the absolute certainty that had once been provided by religion. †

It was natural, as one brought up in the traditions of the humanities, that he looked first to the discipline of history to provide this "firm foundation" for philosophy. Plato, after all, had delivered his philosophical sound bites in the form of dialogues between Socrates and others that had some basis in historical fact. But on reflection, René decided that history is bunk, little more than the heavily biased story of the vanquished as told by the victor. Historians invent, omit, and argue, argue, argue.

Frustrated and disappointed, he looked to science—and liked what he saw. The new experimental method provided consensus (hence a kind of objectivity) even as it encouraged individuals to think, and test, for themselves. And mathematics, the language of science, was clear and precise, completely unambiguous. René concluded that if philosophy could completely separate from history and model itself only on science, it would achieve that absolute certainty after which he lusted.

Now there was a third transformation of philosophy, beyond history and science, that is little remarked upon in the official textbooks. Descartes was so successful in convincing others of his special brilliance that he got invited to the court of Queen Christina of Sweden, where he became her "tutor." In effect, René became the court pet, the royal philo-jester. Philosophy then passed into its third and final stage of evolution: that of entertainment. For after just under a year of this, weary of comic performing, Descartes suitably died of pneumonia. Like Lou Costello (who drowned "accidentally" at the height of his career) and so many other clowns, inside René was just a sad sack.

Descartes' death actually marked the end of modern philosophy, but no one seemed to notice. Even the French didn't get the joke and went on to produce fat tomes like Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. (Of course, the French worship Jerry Lewis as the god of comedy. . .) Needless to say, the pedantic humorless Germans plodded on through the muck of Kant and the mire of Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein etc., while the dry stuffy English could do no better than hacks like Hobbes, Mill, Russell, and Ayer.

What has all of this to do with the paranormal, you ask? Unfortunately, plenty.

When Sidgwick, Myers, James and the others founded the Society for Psychical Research in the last century, they turned away from the intellectual ruins of Protestantism (just as Descartes had from those of medieval Catholicism) and looked to history as the path to truth about the paranormal. They collected weird stories and tried their best to authenticate them. Fort's journalistic approach to the forbidden data of "the damned" was similarly grounded, the journalism of today being the basis of the history of tomorrow.

Now there was something fundamentally right-headed about this early approach. Schopenhauer once said that it is not in science, but only in the discipline of history, that "we see the mind occupied with quite individual things for their own sake." Particular events, like JFK's assassination, are unique and unrepeatable, just as all of us historical actors are one of a kind. Even pseudo-scientists like Marx, who search for historical laws and patterns, must reckon with this hard truth. It follows that, if my observations about my own anomalous experiences have any merit, the individual dimension cannot be ignored or suppressed without inviting distortion and falsification.

But when the tedious, time consuming historical approach to anomalies did not yield absolute certainty, it was unceremoniously dumped, virtually whole hog, for the lofty but infinitely more sexy methods of laboratory research. Psychological research "pulled a Descartes," so to speak, and re-invented itself as parapsychology.

Although this second, purely scientific, phase seems to remain in full gear in some quarters, there is new evidence to suggest that we are now moving into a campy burlesque of the third and final stage of the process. In the new epoch, the paranormal, like philosophy before it, will become entertainment, pure and simple.

According to Raymond Moody—the researcher who coined the term "near-death experience" (NDE)—this is really what the paranormal has basically been all along: entertainment, play, recreation; tales told to inspire wonder, awe, hope, love. This is what he argues in his most recent, exceedingly brilliant and hysterically funny book, *The Last Laugh: a new philosophy of near-death experiences, apparitions, and the paranormal* (1999). There Moody (who, it must be remembered, has a Ph.D. in academic philosophy in addition to his psychiatric M.D.) maintains that the scientific method never was appropriate for the study of the paranormal in the first place and could not be used to definitively "prove" the existence of an afterlife.

Moody does a hilarious job of deconstructing not only the literal-minded, hate-belching, demon-calling "funda-Christians" who have thumped him with their Bibles since the beginning of his research, but also the "Raymond Moody" he says was invented by publishers and literary agents. *That* fictitious character was the genial fellow who reassured us that all those tales that folks told about leaving their bodies and floating down dark tunnels and encountering loving Beings of Light were *literally true*. (It turns out the publishers of his 1972 work *Life After Life* chopped off the crucial last chapter in which he made it clear that this was not so. Oops!)

Moody points out that such literalism is impossible in principle, for the entire language of the paranormal is figurative and metaphorical through and through. Even, he observes, the very "notion of an afterlife is often cast into words as a spatial metaphor (the world beyond, the other side)."³ But this is literally as nonsensical as saying that God is a nasty man with a beard who sits up on a throne in the sky.

It is impossible to do justice to the full brilliance of Moody's book here. He even applies the categories of entertainment to the snake oil performers who hawk their wares (NDE stories) on the New Age "circuit," as well as to all the supposedly serious-minded participants in the continuing and seemingly interminable (pseudo-) "debates" over the validity of the NDE. The altogether predictable, tightly scripted conflict between The Parapsychologist, The Scientific Skeptic, and The Religious Fundamentalist is a ritual performance, as stylized as kabuki, a bit of play acting designed to distract and keep us from realizing that these questions cannot be settled in a straightforward factual way.

Professor Moody thus wants an end to the paranormal as we have known and loved (or hated) it; the whole thing, he insists, was predicated on a giant category mistake. Once we shift categories from "science" to "entertainment" and all become what he joyfully dubs "playful paranormalists," the seemingly intractable problems of the past will, in good old Wittgensteinian fashion, merely dissolve, leaving no trace.

However, I envision an end to the paranormal of a somewhat different kind. While I agree with Moody that the language of the paranormal is informed by metaphor, I don't see why we should give up the notion that some of its claims are factually true, even if we lack the ability, even in principle, to establish those claims. It may, for example, turn out that Einstein was right after all, and that the light barrier proves impossible to break. Yet it would seem utterly small-minded to insist that therefore the question of whether there is intelligent life in the Andromeda galaxy is literally nonsensical, simply because the claim could never be verified or falsified by us. The limits of our knowledge are the limits of our knowledge; they are *not* the limits of reality or even of intelligibility.

The paranormal is thus not completely bereft of factual content. Either I do or do not survive bodily death. Either Atlantis existed or it did not. It may indeed be entertaining to consider the various

possibilities, but it is not *just* entertainment after all. At stake is the question of who and what I am, and the true history of the human race. Identity and destiny are serious issues. We wouldn't bother to make fun of them if they weren't.

What links not merely Moody's revisionism but the whole of the history of the paranormal directly with Cartesianism, I think, is this reductionist notion that *everything really is just some one thing and nothing more*. There is "but one truth for each thing," declared Descartes, and "anyone who finds it knows as much as one can know about that thing." Having lost his Catholic faith, Descartes tried, in succession, history, science, and finally clowning on for philosophical size. Yet, in the end, nothing really fit.

Now the paranormalists come marching along singing virtually the same song: "It's all only history," then "No, it's all strictly science;" and finally, "I have it right now, it's all basically just play." Like Descartes, they want to be able to sum it all up tidily, once and for all. The noisy ghost of medieval certainty still haunts the halls of postmodern paranormalism, trumpeting the Occamist virtue of simplicity over all.

But the real category mistake is the belief that the paranormal will ever fit neatly into any one single category, genre, or discipline. In essence it is part fact, part fancy, part work, part play, part symbol, part literal, part madness, part genius. History, science, and entertainment are but a few of the approaches that are required in order even to begin to appreciate the true significance of the paranormal, because in the end, the paranormal is as vast and varied as life itself. We need a more, not less, comprehensive approach.

So my advice is this: Let's stop imperialistically trying to put an end to someone else's abstract idea of the paranormal and concentrate instead on the rich complexity of our own actual paranormal experience. Maybe if we do this, we can get on to our real business (and play), and the end of the end of the paranormal will finally be at hand.

