

The Scoble Report Some Implications for Parapsychology

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Members may well be aware of this Report, prepared by Montague Keen, Arthur Ellison and David Fontana and published by the SPR. It was based on a long sequence of sittings with physical mediums that took place mostly at Scoble, in Norfolk, but also in Europe and America. (A separate account of these sittings by Montague Keen is to be found elsewhere in this Newsletter). The remarkable phenomena purported to be a continuation, in very different form, after a lapse of some 70 years, of the Cross-Correspondences, which featured so largely in the work of the SPR in the early years of the last century.

The Report aroused strong opposition from some members of the Council of the SPR and raised important issues about investigations of the paranormal; these issues are the subject of this article.

The sittings were largely under the control of a number of 'spirit communicators' and a team of spirits who were guiding them. (In this article, they will be described as such without prejudice to other understandings of their nature.) The group had been meeting for some time when it was suggested that observers should be invited. The first investigators were Montague Keen, Arthur Ellison and Ralph Noyes, whose place was taken at an early stage by David Fontana. Although acting in a personal capacity, they were all seasoned psychic investigators as well as being distinguished figures in their own fields. Other knowledgeable observers were present at a number of sessions.

It is difficult to summarise the views of those who believed that the evidence was good and those who were not satisfied with the controls under which it had been produced, but suffice to say that the critics were firm in their opposition and sought to block the publication of the report. However, in a day-long meeting on 11th December 1999, attended by some 150 people who had previously been provided with copies of the Report, there appeared to be a strong consensus that the critics had not established their case and that a more constructive approach was called for.

In order to understand the points at issue, some historical context is necessary. A group of Cambridge dons and others founded the SPR in 1882. Their concerns centred on issues relating to the survival of death. The data, suggestive of survival, that they collected in the succeeding 50 years, was massive, but had little effect on the prevailing materialist paradigm. In the early 1930's, interest shifted to trying to establish by laboratory-controlled experiments, that paranormal influences were real. Evidence gathered since then has been virtually conclusive, but again the impact seems to have been negligible in changing prevailing attitudes.

It was natural, therefore, that psychical researchers, and later, parapsychologists, should have been preoccupied with trying to prove, in the most rigorous possible way, that paranormal phenomena occurred. This is reflected in the approach of the critics of the Scoble Report. It was summed up clearly by Alan Gauld. As he said in the Report: 'Almost everyone would agree that in this area explanations involving putative paranormal factors should not be advanced until explanations invoking only normal ones (that is, factors accepted by or derivable from current scientific knowledge) have been exhausted. This explanatory

principle leads to a methodological one. One cannot, of course, move to a paranormal explanation just because one is unable to think of a normal one (though unfortunately many people do just this)... If a phenomenon is to be regarded as paranormal there must be compelling reasons for ruling out any sort of normal explanation. Or, to put it another way, normal explanations must be presumed to hold, even if one can't work out their details, unless one can obtain and present findings that actively preclude all received normal explanations however ingeniously developed. The principle of the primacy of normal explanation thus leads to a methodological assumption, which has to be adopted in all attempts to demonstrate that paranormal phenomena really occur.' (The Scole Report pp 416-7)

This sounds both rigorous and reasonable and provides a useful guide under strictly controlled laboratory conditions, when the aim is to prove that paranormal events occur. But, of course, the principle of the primacy of normal explanation, especially when extended to cover not only cases where a normal explanation is possible, but might in the future prove possible, is an open-ended option which, given sufficient assumptions, could preclude virtually all paranormal phenomena, especially those occurring outside laboratory conditions. The conditions in which the Scole sittings took place were subject to constraints but of a form very different from those in the laboratory; and they were not under the control of the observers.

Everyone agreed that there was one major weakness in the conditions at those sessions, in that they took place in darkness, although all concerned were sitting round a table, close to each other, and members of the group wore luminous Velcro bands on their wrists. Also, many of the phenomena involved lights, which offered some, usually unpredictable, illumination. The darkness was, however, insisted on by the spirit guides as they said they were still developing their techniques, though they hoped to be able to allow the use of light later. This may sound suspicious but several factors are relevant. There is some evidence that people in 'out-of-the-body' states and spirits are indeed susceptible to electromagnetic forces. In any event, there was seemingly little scope for cheating in the room and the risk of discovery would have been great. And even if a significant percentage of the sessions or phenomena were to be eliminated on such a possibility, the problems of explaining the remaining phenomena would be virtually unaltered.

Beyond this, however, there lies a major question about the rationale of the principle of the primacy of normal explanation. The idea that everything must be regarded as having a normal explanation, unless there is no other possible explanation, is completely unscientific in that science assumes that phenomena are approached as far as possible in an unbiased manner and seeks to let the facts speak for themselves. The claim that because, given sufficient assumptions, the phenomena can be explained by reference to well-established principles of human action and motivation, such an explanation is to be preferred, would exclude much of normal science, for normal science often seeks exceptional states as a means of clarifying issues. This seems to be simply an attempt to explain the phenomena while making the smallest possible dent on the materialist world picture.

Yet the assumption that the world is entirely material and everything can be explained within a closed materialist framework has passed its sell-by date. It is difficult to reconcile with quantum physics and it involves ignoring or explaining away an entire range of mental and spiritual experiences, including the very consciousness from which the materialist picture is built. As they come increasingly to face the problem of reconciling materialism and

consciousness - now known as *the hard question* - some distinguished philosophers have become doubtful whether there is any possible solution. Yet as Searle says, 'After half a century of this recurring pattern in debates about materialism, one might suppose that the materialists and dualists would think there is something wrong with the terms of the debate. But so far, this intuition seems not to have occurred to either side.' [*The Rediscovery of Mind* p49] Nor, seemingly, has it occurred to supporters of the primacy of normal explanation.

As has been noted, the onus on parapsychologists virtually to prove that paranormal events do occur, has been fulfilled in many rigorously controlled laboratory experiments: and the work of Robert Jahn and Brenda Dunne at Princeton may be cited as an example. That materialists have paid such work almost no attention is not the fault of parapsychologists. If, however, the materialists had acknowledged the strength of that evidence, the onus would have shifted to them to justify their assumptions, which are vulnerable on many counts.

It is an entirely different matter, however, for parapsychologists to insist that all individual instances of paranormal phenomena occurring *outside* the laboratory must meet such rigorous tests. One might have thought that after seventy years of such testing, we could accept that paranormal events occur and then use a level playing field for their examination, treating each case on its merits. Indeed, normal and paranormal are hardly exclusive categories, for many events are paranormal simply by virtue of the context in which they occur. The very distinction between normal and paranormal is the product of the Western materialist cultural paradigm.

Just before Christmas an invitation arrived on my desk from the ASPR to attend a lecture in New York by Oliver Bernier on 'The Spiritual and the Paranormal in India'. The write-up says: 'For the Hindu culture the paranormal is constantly present, in past lives, in the actual (if mostly invisible) presence of the gods, and in the occasional appearance of a demon. Indeed, these phenomena have a far greater reality than the world of the senses: as they believe that what we see and what we feel is a mere illusion, so the ultimate and permanent reality is that of the spirit.'

This then raises the question of what parapsychologists and parapsychology are seeking to achieve. Not surprisingly, many parapsychologists have sought to establish their credentials as scientists and this has emphasised the need for rigor, measurement and the closest possible knowledge of the phenomena being studied. Regrettably, it has also tended to reduce the subject to the study of phenomena that can be so tested. But in more normal science the establishment of the accuracy and reliability of data is largely met by the repeating of experiments in other laboratories. While this may be achievable in physics and chemistry, and in much of the biological sciences, it is less applicable in other fields such as astronomy, geology, and palaeontology, and especially in psychology and sociology. There other techniques have to operate. But, however the accuracy of the data is established, the real work of science is to explain and understand, notably by the formation of hypotheses and their testing. To try to show that phenomena are paranormal is hardly an hypothesis in that sense, for it simply shows an event is not normal and that, in itself, explains almost nothing.

Science is normally regarded as the epitome of reason, but here is always a leap of insight before the formation of a new hypothesis. Such leaps are not dependent on reason or rigour; they may even come from dreams or from data that eventually proves unreliable. It is

the power of newly formed hypotheses to explain and predict and thus enlarge our model of reality that matters.

If the principle of the primacy of normal explanation is applied to the phenomena from Scole, and data that might, taken in isolation and given enough assumptions, have a normal explanation are eliminated, the evidence is simply decimated. Yet, if we are to *understand* the phenomena, the evidence has to be considered as a whole and set in the context of a vast range of other paranormal happenings, deriving not only from the work of investigators in the West over the past hundred years or so, but far wider. After all, we are not pioneers in the investigation of the next world: peoples from widely varying cultures throughout the recorded history of man have already been there.

The Scole phenomena raise many issues at different levels that need explanation and clarification. Are, for instance, the communicators and the team behind them full surviving persons, or could they be impersonating spirits; just what are the constraints upon their powers, and, in particular, on their communicating? The answers to such questions would, of course, have wider implications and would then themselves raise further questions.

This raises the issue: 'What is the evidence being collected for?' - which goes to the future of parapsychology. We are not in the world of philately where collecting stamps is an end in itself and the slightest hint of counterfeiting causes the price to plummet. I am a firm believer in the scientific method and think that research should now be directed towards attempts to explain and understand the phenomena. There is no principle in science that says that such work cannot take place even if the reliability of the data is only provisionally accepted. Indeed, *all* science proceeds on such a provisional basis, for no data can be regarded as absolutely reliable and the possibility of artefacts or cheating must always be allowed for.

Another issue that should also be addressed is the attitude of the investigators themselves. Increasing evidence points to a sheep/goat effect, and if this is given weight, then our hallowed concepts of objective science are undermined. On this ground alone, we might expect of scientists the capacity to take a *really* open-minded approach, and not only on matters paranormal! Our need is now to seek an overarching conceptual framework, that can embrace all phenomena from the most trivial to the ineffable, as we aim to discover their place in a new paradigm of reality.

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