



In Support of Empirical and Rational Research

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The Spring issue of *Network Review* contained a number of articles which referred to Richard Dawkins and his denial of mystical or psychic experiences. Of particular interest was Howards Jones' article 'The God Confusion'. In *The God Confusion*, Jones notes that Dawkins' denial is based on his belief that mystical and psychic experiences cannot be confirmed by others. In adopting this stance Dawkins appears to be amongst those who argue that the failure of replication (the inability of the experiencers of such phenomena to replicate or repeat their experience on demand) precludes the existence of the supernormal. In the same article Dr. Jones draws attention to Rowan Williams' opinion that 'religion cannot be approached scientifically' and argues that without rational or empirical support beliefs are indistinguishable from imagination. This point is well made and prompted me to provide a brief account of my MPhil Thesis, 'Psychic Phenomena, Meditation, Perception, Actuality — An Australian Study' (completed in 2007).

My study was a secular (in the sense that it had no specific religious connotation) and empirical study of reported psychic

phenomena. It used a questionnaire that involved the matching of perceptions with specific class characteristics rather than an examination of psychic phenomena as such. The questionnaire was based on a medical diagnostic model. Its findings were benchmarked against a previous study and compared with other empirical studies conducted in Britain and America. The thesis, which was inspired by the problem of replication, asked the question 'do people (ordinary Australians) experience psychic phenomena?'

There are many ways to replicate and one of the more interesting ways has been suggested by physicist and mathematician, Gerhard Wassermann. Wassermann argues that medical case histories (like case histories of psychic phenomena), vary in precise detail from case to case but also, for the same illness, share striking common class characteristics which make diagnosis possible for each particular class of illness. And, for the purposes of research, case reports of spontaneously occurring psychic phenomena of a specific class, resemble and can be



considered as valid a research tool as human medical case histories of a particular type of illness. Wassermann does not suggest that experience of mystical and/or psychic phenomena is an illness. In support of his thesis on 'Shadow Matter', Wasserman examined 81 case histories of recorded incidents where people had encountered a paranormal experience and concluded that because of the similarity of the reports that there is ground to believe in the actuality of the experience. The research design for my study built upon Wassermann's methodology but instead of relying on a comparison of recorded case histories utilised a medical diagnostic model.

Diagnostic models have been developed by medical authorities to promote best practice diagnostic standards. Some complex medical conditions resemble psychospiritual experiences in that they have many symptoms which can be confused with a range of other conditions and there is no single specific laboratory test which can identify them. To deal with conditions such as Fibromyalgia, which fulfils the above conditions and others like Amoebic Meningitis, which if untreated can kill within twenty-four hours, doctors have observed a range of signs that are repeatable characteristics of these conditions and from these observations have developed guidelines and criteria. Confirmation that the patient's experience replicates these signs or class characteristics enables the medical practitioner to make an accurate diagnosis i.e. confirm the actuality of the condition.

My diagnostic model took the form of a survey which presented a series of class characteristics to a group of 100 Australians. The characteristics chosen were those associated with six experiences generally recognised as being of a psychic nature: the out-of-body/near-death experience, clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairsentience, and the seeing of auras/photism. Since the content of psychic experience may on occasions overlap, each of these six characteristics might be considered as a being a class characteristic and psychic phenomenon in itself or as a class characteristic generic to a larger and more complex psychic phenomenon (compare the simple experience of hearing a voice with the content of near-death experience). The object of the study was to discover how many individuals within the group evinced the specific characteristics. This proactive approach, in seeking information from people irrespective of their experience of psychic phenomena, is comparable with that of Kenneth Ring. Ring's systematic collection of accounts from adults who had come close to death (there was no stipulation that they had to have had any experiences) played an important role in validating Kübler-Ross and Moody's near-death experience research.

The results of this first survey (Nattress 1), in which 60% of respondents reported that they had recognised and personally experienced one or more of the specifically described phenomena, were then validated by presenting the same questionnaire to a random sample of 135 postgraduate students, currently enrolled at Murdoch University, Western Australia. The results of the Murdoch survey, in which 64% of participants reported that they had personally experienced one or more of the listed class characteristics, were then

quantitatively and qualitatively compared with Nattress 1.

The comparability of the two Australian studies, together with the percentages of respondents who described and experienced each psychic phenomenon confirmed the commonality of each experience. This commonality was further supported by comparison between the Australian survey's qualitative reports of contemporary psychic phenomena and detailed descriptions of psychic and/or mystical phenomena included in four British and one American, more directly religious studies. Thereby, addressing the scientific criterion of replication and clearly validating Wassermann's hypothesis that: because of the similarity of the reports, there is ground to believe in the actuality of the experiences.

The secular Australian study also yielded other interesting results — some of which were theistically and mystically orientated. These other results, which provide substantial material for future research, appear to indicate that there is no reason why religion which is, after all, only the means by which human beings approach God should not be approached scientifically.

References

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Wassermann hypothesises that man consists of an ordinary matter body and, in addition, a Shadow Matter Body which includes a Shadow Matter Brain. Furthermore, that after the death of the ordinary matter body the Shadow Matter Body and its Shadow Matter Brain could live on — possibly indefinitely. The persistence of Shadow Matter could account for a number of psychic phenomena such as: ghosts, out-of-body experiences etc.

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