

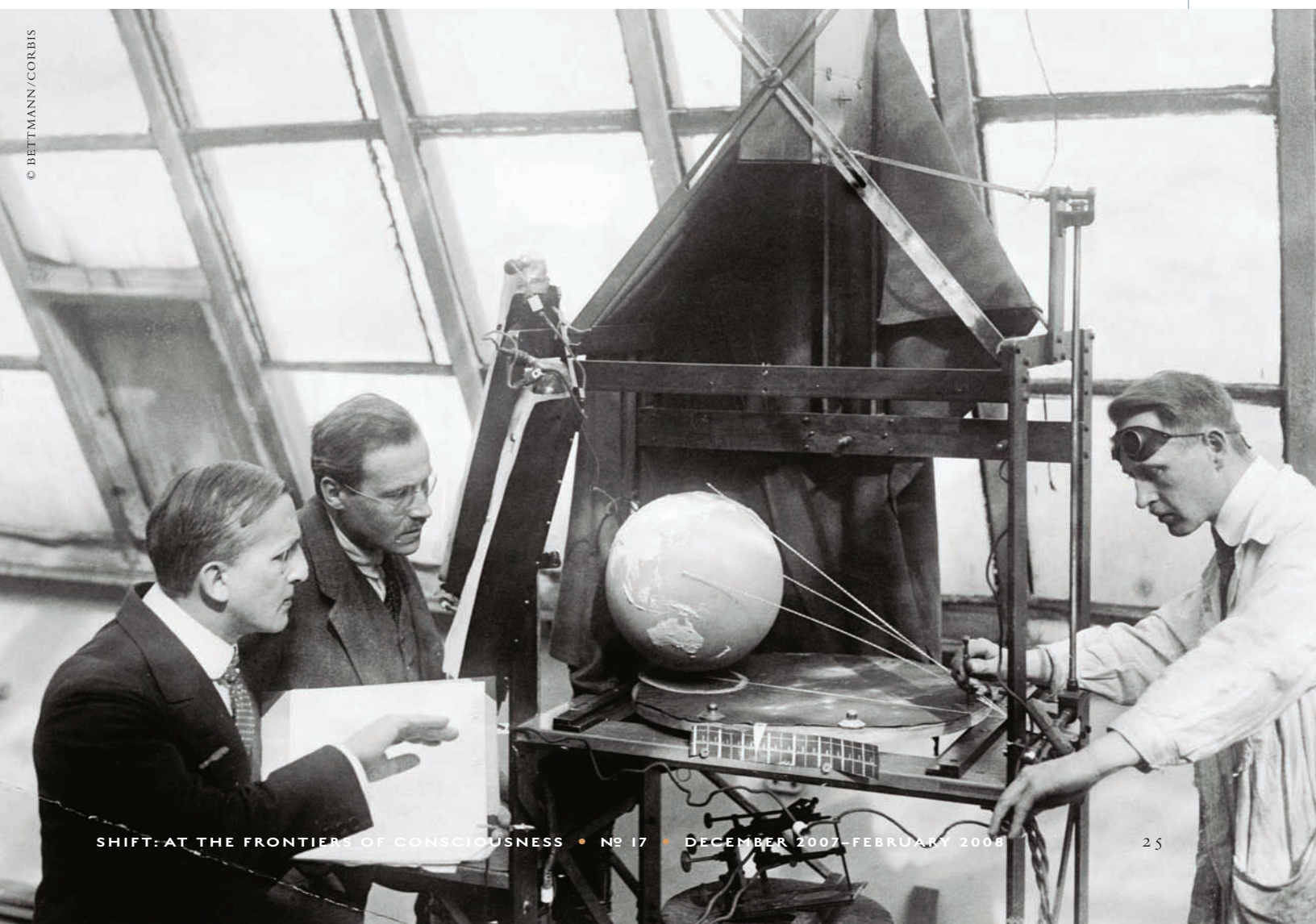
# Disbelief Despite the Evidence

DAVID FONTANA

**W**HY ISN'T THE EVIDENCE (AS OPPOSED simply to the belief) for survival of physical death more widely known and accepted in the West? In addition, why is the evidence treated by certain high-profile scientists as if it ranks with superstitions such as a belief in fairies or Santa Claus? The answer is that research into survival of death has to struggle against four influential groups that, for different reasons, find it challenges their own interests and beliefs and represents a threat to their status and authority.

## ESTABLISHED SCIENCE

The first of these groups is established science. Why are scientists in general seemingly so resistant to any mention of survival of death or indeed of anything suggestive of the paranormal? The typical answer given is that they don't find the evidence convincing, but the truth is that they simply don't know the evidence even exists. They have never studied it and show little sign of even wanting to study it. Ignorance of this kind is acceptable given that most



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scientists have a hard task keeping abreast of developments in their own fields and can hardly be expected to wade through the extensive data on survival of death (my personal library has over six hundred books on the evidence for survival alone) or on psychical research in general, with which research into survival is closely linked. [W]hat is not acceptable is the way that those scientists who express views on the validity of the data pretend they know what they are talking about. . . . A cardinal rule in science is that you familiarize yourself with the evidence before making judgements on it. You don't pretend to knowledge that you do not have, particularly when you are well aware your views carry weight with both colleagues and laypeople and are likely to be picked up by the media.

The next question is why do so many scientists, despite their ignorance of the relevant evidence, have such an actively hostile attitude toward psychical research and the possibility of survival of death? There are several interrelated reasons. Perhaps the most important of them is that many scientists claim that if psychic abilities exist and if the mind survives death (and is therefore nonphysical), then many of the most fundamental laws of science would have to be rewritten. One eminent scientist even told me the whole of his subject, chemical physics, would collapse. This claim is absurd. The known laws of science work perfectly well within their own range of convenience, and the existence of psychic abilities and of a nonmaterial mind do not challenge them within this range. Instead, they add a new dimension to our understanding. Just as quantum mechanics does not negate Newtonian physics, so the existence of nonmaterial energy transfer (as in telepathy, clairvoyance, etc.) and of a nonmaterial mind that survives death do not negate it. They simply indicate

its boundaries. . . . Instead of being the final authority on life and death and everything else, material science simply becomes the science of material things.

A more studied argument sometimes heard from scientists is that survival of death is not a subject that can be put to scientific test. But this is only partly true. We can, for example, test the accuracy of statements given through mediums to unseen and unknown anonymous individuals and purporting to come from the deceased. The recent work of [Archie E.] Roy and [T. J.] Robertson in this country [the United Kingdom] and of [Gary] Schwartz in the United States are good recent examples. Such experiments can be carefully controlled and the data yielded by them can be appropriately analyzed.

In addition, science is not only about experiment but also about observation and the reporting of direct experience. Thus, the experiences of those resuscitated from near death or actual clinical death that suggest the continuation of consciousness, even in the absence of vital physical signs, are also the raw material of science [see the research of P. Fenwick and E. Fenwick; M. Sabom; P. Sartori; and P. Van Lommel, et al.]. The many thousands of reported cases of sightings of deceased relatives and friends at or after the moment of death, the prevalence of deathbed visions, and the fact that surveys show over 40 percent of people report postmortem contact of some kind from a deceased spouse provide other examples. Human observation can, of course, be notoriously fallible, but the similarities between these various experiences mean that no science (in particular my own science of psychology) can ignore them if it wishes to present a holistic picture of how people experience their lives and of what it means to be human.

are still influenced by the fear that mediumship, apparitions, and other spontaneous phenomena risks hindering the scientific acceptance that parapsychology has so painstakingly sought to achieve.

## PARAPSYCHOLOGY

The second group against which research in survival has to struggle is parapsychology. Despite the fact that parapsychology is the very subject that should be most identified with survival research, it has in fact consistently directed the attention of those interested away from it. Parapsychology, the discipline largely created at Duke University by Professor William MacDougall and by J. B. and Louisa Rhine in the 1930s, has sought to bring psychical research out of the real world and into the laboratory in order to obtain evidence likely to gain scientific acceptance. Research into hauntings, séances, mediumship, poltergeist phenomena, and other goings on outside the laboratory has been largely discouraged as Professor Rhine considered these phenomena could not be studied scientifically and—due to the possibilities of fraud and misrepresentation associated with them—were largely responsible for negative attitudes toward the existence of psychic abilities. In other words, parapsychology wished to rid itself of what it saw as the detritus of the past. Thus, fieldwork—unless it could be undertaken with all the scientific controls that were de rigueur in the laboratory (an almost impossible task)—was regarded as generally off limits. It was not that Professor Rhine and his colleagues rejected the idea of survival or doubted its importance as a subject for debate, as J. B. Rhine himself made clear; it was simply that in their view it had no place in experimental science.

Some seventy years later, the great majority of parapsychologists (by which I mean those with recognized academic qualifications in the subject and based for the most part in universities or reputable research laboratories) still follow much the same line of thinking and are still influenced

by the fear that fieldwork research into mediumship, apparitions, and other spontaneous survival-related phenomena risks hindering the scientific acceptance that parapsychology has so painstakingly sought to achieve over three-quarters of a century. However, regrettably, it has to be said that such achievement still remains elusive. Despite the first-class work carried out by many parapsychologists and their exemplary use of scientific methods and controls (far more exemplary than those sometimes employed in other experimental sciences) and the extensive range of positive results obtained (see, for example, Radin 1997 for an excellent survey), parapsychology is still not accepted among scientists largely for the reasons already identified. Even demonstrating an interest in the subject risks blighting the career of the most promising young academic.

The consequence of the efforts by parapsychologists to appeal to mainstream science has therefore not been scientific acceptance but the diversion of attention away from the very subject, survival research, that helped inspire Professor MacDougall's decision, after accepting the chair of the Department of Psychology at Duke University, to establish the first university-based laboratory for psychical research. Like the majority of the group of academics from Trinity College Cambridge who founded the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882 as the first attempt to study psychic phenomena scientifically, MacDougall saw mind as nonphysical (his *Body and Mind*, first published in 1911, remains a classic study of the mind-body relationship) ... [and] made clear that, informally, "The principal aim of the SPR is to obtain, if possible, empirical evidence that human personality may and does survive in some sense and degree the death of the body." ➡

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## ESTABLISHED RELIGION

The third group that has opposed survival research is another body that should in theory be among its strongest supporters, namely established religion. Across the centuries religion, while not questioning the existence of communications from the beyond, has equated them with witchcraft and the powers of evil. I well remember the congregations being told from the pulpit by the minister of the church I attended as a boy that contact with the dead was the work of the devil. The messages received through mediums, he assured us, came in fact from demons impersonating the souls that mediums claimed were communicating . . . [And] heresy was always seen as a potent threat to the power and authority of the Church, which insisted that the priesthood and the clergy were the only intermediaries between man and God and the only arbiters on who deserved heaven and who deserved hell. No one other than the ordained had the right of direct access to the Divine or to other worlds. Only the ordained could act “vicariously” (hence, “vicar”) for Christ.

I am not criticizing established religion or subscribing to the nonsense that it is the root of all evil (a nonsense that not only reflects ignorance of religion but also conveniently ignores the actions of Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and other atheist dictators). I am criticizing only the misuse that men have made of religion in order to further their own desire for power. The belief that we survive physical death is at the heart of all the great religions, but particularly in the Christian churches the emphasis is upon believing this simply because we are told to believe it. Christ’s resurrection is said to be all we need. Little is taught—or it seems known—about the nature of the afterlife. Inevitably this leaves a wide range of unanswered questions, and religion would be greatly strengthened if it could provide answers to them. We live in an age where for many people faith and belief are no longer

enough. Sadly, having abandoned faith and belief, such people have nothing to put in their place except materialism and short-term consumerism.

## THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The fourth group, the general public, does not so much oppose research into survival as avoid it. Death, as we are frequently reminded these days, is a taboo subject. We are in fact the only age in which this has become the case. Right through to Victorian and Edwardian times and to the carnage of the two World Wars, people lived with the reality of death. Many large families would see only two or three of their children out of a much larger number survive into adult life. Even as adults, death was a constant companion. We may scoff at the sixteenth-century scholars who kept skulls on their desks as *memento mori* [“reminders of death”], or at the Victorians with their lockets containing tresses of hair from deceased loved ones and their mourning veils and their partiality for dark, gloomy Victorian gothic architecture, furniture, and tombstones, yet these were all examples of coming to terms with death. For the most part people fell sick, declined, and died at home, and the tragedy of death was forever present. Thanks to immunization, antibiotics, improvements in public health and in medicine generally, we are the first generation in recorded history that is insulated from many of the reminders of our own mortality. Consequently, there is an unspoken resistance to any talk of leaving this life and of what might happen next.

The general resistance to any discussion of death and an afterlife is sometimes justified by the argument that we should put our thoughts and our energies into improving this life rather than into diverting attention to what may happen when it is over. This argument is based upon the assumption that thoughts of an afterlife are a form of escapism from the present and thus hinder attempts to

improve what goes on within it. This assumption is misplaced. The recognition that there is more to our being than the short time we spend in this world can and should have a profound effect upon our behavior while we are here. The acceptance of an afterlife implies also an acceptance that our present lives have a meaning and a purpose greater than themselves and that we are not simply biological accidents programmed by natural selection and with nothing to drive us except our own genes. The way in which we live our present lives becomes part of a much bigger picture in which compassion, altruism, and other transpersonal values are recognized as timeless essentials that help define our humanity.

## NEW ANSWERS

What of the future? There seems to be a growing recognition that science cannot provide us with answers to life's fundamental questions. There is in addition a recognition among a growing section of the population of the so-called developed world that we have pushed consumerism past its sustainable limits and that possessions do not provide the route either to individual happiness or to a future for our planet. The search for greater meaning in life may therefore gain momentum. We shall see. People's thoughts do indeed seem to turn most readily to religion and to the possibilities of an afterlife when times are hard. 🌐

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