

# The New Paranatural Paradigm

## *Claims of Communicating with the Dead*

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*The paranatural paradigm deals with other dimensions of reality beyond our own and apart from the supernatural. Philosopher Paul Kurtz examines the paradigm in the context of life after death.*

PAUL KURTZ

A new paranatural paradigm seems to be emerging in postmodern culture. There is great public fascination with a paranatural/paranormal conception of the universe, fed in large part by the mass media and encouraged by a number of “fringe sciences,” which claim to support this outlook. The cultural backdrop for this is the development of postmodernism in the academy—the denial that science provides us with objective truth, the belief that it is only one mythic narrative among others, and that a New Age paradigm is emerging that displaces or drastically modifies scientific naturalism.

What do I mean by the term “paranatural”? Science presupposes naturalism; that is, it seeks to develop causal

explanations of natural phenomena, and it tests its hypotheses and theories by reference to the principles of logic, empirical observation, experimental prediction, and confirmation.

This is in contrast with supernatural explanations, which claim to deal with an order of existence beyond the visible or observable universe, and attributes events to occult causes. Supernaturalism postulates divine powers intervening miraculously in natural causal sequences. Thus it is alleged that the natural and material universe needs to be supplemented by a supernatural reality, which transcends human understanding and can only be approached by mysticism and faith. The domain of faith, it is said, supplements the domain of reason.

There are, however, two classes of events that stand between the natural and supernatural realms and enable us in some sense to deal with the occult. These refer to (1) paranormal and (2) paranatural phenomena. The term "paranormal" was used in the past century by parapsychologists (such as J.B. Rhine and Samuel Soal) to refer to a class of anomalous events that its proponents claimed were inexplicable in terms of normal materialistic sciences. "Para" meant "besides, alongside of, or beyond" naturalistic psychology. Nonetheless, these parapsychologists maintain that it was possible to describe and perhaps interpret these events experimentally, and they did so by referring to a range of psi phenomena, which referred to ESP, telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis.

There is another range of events, which I have labeled as "paranatural," that deal with still other dimensions of reality: classical mystical or supernatural claims that allegedly intrude into our universe from without. I am here referring primarily to a theistic order of reality and to phenomena including discarnate souls, intelligent design, and "creation science." Visitations from extraterrestrials beyond this world may be considered to be both paranormal and paranatural. Included under this rubric of "paranatural" are some classical religious phenomena, such as weeping statues, stigmata, exorcism and possession, faith healing, the Shroud of Turin, past-life regressions used as evidence for reincarnation, historical revelations by prophets who carry mes-

sages from On High, and other so-called religious miracles. All of these have an empirical component and are not completely transcendental, and hence they are capable of some experimental testing and historical reconstruction of their claims. Although these anomalous events are beyond nature, in one sense, proponents of them seek to offer some kind of empirical evidence to support their hypotheses that there are nonnatural, nonmaterial, or spiritual processes at work in the universe.

I disagree with the claims of the defenders of the *para*. I do not think that either the paranormal or paranatural exist outside

of nature or that they constitute dimensions of reality that undermine naturalism. *Para* is a substitute for our ignorance at any one time in history (as is the term "miracle," which is interjected when we do not understand the causes of phenomena). Indeed, as we expand the frontiers of knowledge, phenomena considered *para* can, I submit, be given naturalistic

or normal explanations, and this range of phenomena can either be interpreted by the existing body of explanatory scientific principles or by the introduction of new ones.

## The Paranatural Paradigm and Life After Death

I wish to illustrate this by dealing with the intriguing question: What is the evidence for life after death? Can we communicate with the dead? That is, Are we able to be in touch with people who have died? Do they have some form of existence, perhaps as "discarnate spirits" or "disembodied souls"? This is an age-old question that is related to faith in immortality and a very deep hunger for it. Although it has been interpreted as "paranormal," it may more appropriately be considered to be "paranatural" because of its religious significance. Indeed, for the great supernatural religions of the world—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—belief in an afterlife and the promise of heaven are central.

At present there is intense popular interest in these questions in the United States. It is stimulated by the mass media, at least as measured by the number of popular books, magazine articles, movies, and television and radio programs devoted to the theme. The films *The Sixth Sense* (with Bruce Willis and Haley Osment) and *Frequency* are examples of the prevailing interest, as are the best-selling books by James Van Praagh (*Talking to Heaven*, 1997; *Reaching to Heaven*, 1999), John Edward (*One Last Time*, 1998), Sylvia Browne (*The Other Side and Back*, 1999), and Rosemary Altea (*You Own the Power*, 1999). Dan Rather on CBS, the Fox TV network, *Larry King Live*, and other talk-show hosts have devoted many uncritical programs to these claims. For example, the HBO TV network did a special last year, "Life Afterlife," purporting to present the scientific



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Haley Joel Osment starred in *The Sixth Sense* as Cole Sear.

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examination of survival. It interviewed dozens of people, all of whom claim to have communicated with the dead, and several parapsychologists, all arguing the case for survival. Included in this special were critical comments by two skeptics—one more than usual! This is supposed to constitute a “balanced” documentary, and it is typical of the state of American media when dealing with paranatural or paranormal claims. There are all too few objective programs examining such questions; most favor a spiritual-paranormal interpretation.

As a result of a massive media onslaught, polls in the last decade place the United States as number one in belief in life after death in the democratic world, and higher than virtually all European countries. Two cross-national surveys conducted for the International Social Survey Program in 1991 and 1993<sup>1</sup> indicate that the United States ranked highest, along with Ireland and the Philippines, for those who believe in heaven (63.17% of the population), highest for those who believe in hell (49.6%), and highest for those who believe in life after death (55%). The US was lowest of twenty-one nations on knowledge of human evolution (44.2%), lower than Poland and Russia. Recent polls have shown the level of credulity growing in the past decade. In 1996 a poll conducted by Goldhaber Associates (at the State University of New York at Buffalo) indicated that 90 percent of Americans were either “religious” or “somewhat religious.”<sup>2</sup> A recent poll conducted for *Newsweek* magazine by the Princeton Survey Research Associates, based on a sample of 752 adults interviewed indicated that 84 percent of Americans said that God performed miracles and 77 percent said saints or God can cure people otherwise medically incurable.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, the US is allegedly the most advanced scientific-technological society in the world.

## A History of Life After Death Claims

What do scientists have to say about life after death? As the readers of *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* know, science has been investigating our ability to communicate with the dead for at least 150 years and it has attempted to discover empirical evidence in support of the claim. It began to do so with the emergence of spiritualism in the nineteenth century; more specifically, with the Fox sisters (Margaret and Kate), two young girls in Hydesville, New York (outside of Rochester), who in 1848 first claimed that they could receive messages from “the spirit world beyond.” In their presence, there were strange rappings; people would receive answers to their questions spelled out by the number of taps (Kurtz 1985). The basic premise was that human personality survived death and could communicate with specially endowed mediums. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century spiritualism swept the United States, England, and Europe. Thousands of mediums soon appeared, all seemingly capable of communicating with the dead. The most popular method of investigation was to try to communicate in a specially darkened séance room, wherein the discarnate entity would make its presence known by physical or verbal manifestations: table tipping, levitation of objects, ectoplasmic emissions, teleportation, materializations, automatic writings, etc.

A committee of medical doctors at the University of Buffalo

tested the Fox sisters in 1851 and attributed their raps to the cracking of their toe knuckles or knee caps against a wooden floor or bedstead. The physicians did a controlled experiment by placing the girls' feet on pillows, and nothing happened. The great physicist Michael Faraday investigated table tipping (1852) and found that it was due to pressure exerted by the fingers of the sitters (whether voluntarily or involuntarily). Sir Walter Crookes investigated the most colorful mediums of the day, D. D. Home (1871) and Florence Cook (1873), and thought that they had special abilities of mediumship—though critics believe that he was duped by both (Hall 1962, 1984).

The Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882 in Great Britain by Henry Sidgwick, Richard Hodgson, F. W. H. Myers, Edmund Gurney, and others to investigate survival of life after death, among other questions. The American branch of the Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1885 by William James at Harvard. These researchers examined reports of apparitions and ghostly hauntings. It was difficult to corroborate these subjective eyewitness accounts and so these investigations focused on physical manifestations. There were numerous photographs of ghosts—which it was soon discovered could easily be doctored. Many famous mediums such as Eusapia Palladino (in Italy) and Leonora Piper (in Boston) were tested under controlled conditions in an effort to determine whether they possessed extraordinary powers.

Palladino was especially elusive, and the scientific community was split as to whether she was fraudulent. The Feilding Report was an account of sittings done in Naples (1909) by a team of scientists who thought she was genuine. Palladino was also tested in the United States at Harvard by Hugo Münsterberg (1909) and at Columbia University (1910) by a team of scientists; and in both cases the physical levitation of the table behind her and the feeling of being pinched by her spirit control (called John King) was found to be caused by her adroit ability to stretch her leg in contortions and to pinch sitters with her toes, or levitate a small table behind her. This was detected by having a man dressed in black crawl under the table and see her at work. A subsequent Feilding report (1911) also found that she had cheated (Kurtz 1985).

Late in his career the famous magician Houdini (1874–1926) exposed several bogus mediums. By the 1920s the spiritualist movement was thoroughly discredited, because when the controls were tightened, the effect disappeared; skeptics insisted that if a person claims to be in contact with a spiritual entity, there must be some independent physical corroboration by impartial observers (Houdini 1924, 1981).

In the 1930s the survival question in science was laid aside. J.B. Rhine and others focused instead on psi phenomena, again with controversial results, because scientists demanded replicable experiments by neutral observers, which were difficult to come by (Hansel 1980). In any case, whether or not psi existed was independent of the survival question.

## Spiritualism Returns

In recent decades interest in the survival question has reappeared. This is rather surprising to skeptical investigators. No doubt this revival of interest is due in part to the growth of



religiosity and spirituality on the broader American cultural scene, but is also due to the sensationalism of the mass media. I can only briefly outline some of the claims that had been made and the kinds of research that has been done. Most of this work is highly questionable, for the standards of rigorous methodological inquiry so essential to science seem to have declined drastically from what occurred in the early part of the last century.

(1) *Channeling to the other side.* Surprisingly, a new class of mediums, now called channelers, have emerged (such as James Van Praagh, John Edward, Sylvia Browne, and Rosemary Altea previously cited) who claim to be able to be put themselves into immediate contact with a dead relative or friend and to convey

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a message back from them. Thus, what we have are subjective reports based on the word of the channeler that he or she is in touch with the departed spirit. There are two ways that this is done. First, there are "hot" readings, when the channeler may know something by previous research about the person being read. A good case of this is Arthur Ford, who did a reading of Bishop James Pike and claimed he was in contact with his son who had committed suicide. It was discovered after Ford's death that he had done extensive background investigation of Pike's son before the reading. The most common method used, however, is the skillful use of "cold readings" by the channeler. The public here is taken in by flim-flammy, and there is all too little effort to critically examine the claims made.

There has been a massive shift in the methodology used. If in previous decades scientists demanded some corroborative and/or physical manifestation of mediumship, today all rigorous standards of evidence and verification seem to have been abandoned. Psychologist Ray Hyman has shown how a psychic gives a general cold reading: if he throws out messages from the spirit world to an audience someone will usually emerge to whom it fits (Hyman 1977). Thus, he may ask, "Does anyone know a Mary, or a William?" And most likely a person will step forth who does, and then the reading proceeds, on a hit-and-miss basis. The skillful channeler simply has to have one or two lucky hits to mystify the audience.

(2) *Apparitions and other sightings.* Similar considerations apply to the epidemic of eyewitness testimonials that people have been reporting of ghostly apparitions, angels, and other ethereal entities. Such stories are pervasive today, since a tale once uttered may spread rapidly throughout the population; this is facilitated by the mass media and becomes contagious.

If someone claims to see ghosts or angels, other people, perhaps millions, may likewise begin to encounter them.

What is so curious is that people who see ghosts usually see them clothed. It is one thing to say that a discarnate soul has survived, but that his or her clothing and other physical objects have survived is both amusing and contrary to the laws of physics.

The most parsimonious explanation that we have for this phenomenon is that it is in the eye of the beholder, satisfying some deep-felt need, a transcendental temptation or will-to-believe. The demand for independent objective verification seems to be ignored. It is puzzling why so many people will accept uncorroborated subjective reports, particularly when we find them unreliable. The death of a loved one can cause untold

psychological trauma, and there are powerful motives, psychological and indeed sociological, for believing in their survival. Thus there are naturalistic psychological and sociological explanations that better account for the prevalence of such phenomenological givens, without the need to postulate discarnate beings or our ability to communicate with them.

Let me briefly outline two other areas of survival research, which at least claim to be more carefully designed.

(3) *Death-bed visions.* Osiris and Haraldsson (1974, 1977) sent out questionnaires to doctors and nurses to ask them to describe the verbal accounts of death-bed visions of people in their last moments of dying. The question is whether these persons were able to communicate with departed friends or relatives at the last moment or were merely hallucinating, as skeptics suggest they were. In any case, virtually all of this data is second-hand, and is influenced by cultural expectations that when we die we will meet people on the other side.

(4) *The phenomenology of near-death experience.* This is a very popular area of research today, widely touted as evidence for communication, and based on first-hand testimony. Much research has gone into this intriguing area by Raymond Moody (1975, 1977), Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1981), Kenneth Ring (1980, 1984, 1998), Michael Sabom (1982), and Melvin Morse (1990), among others. These extended phenomenological reports claim to give us evidence from the other side from people who were dying and resuscitated. There is an out-of-body experience, a vision of a tunnel, a bright light, a recall of one's life, and perhaps a meeting of beings on the other side.

Critics claim that the descriptive collage offered is of the dying process, and that in no case do we have reports of persons who have died (i.e., experienced brain death) and communicated with those on the other side. There are a variety of alternative naturalistic explanations. Skeptics maintain we are most likely dealing with psychological phenomena, where the person facing death has either hallucinations, has reached a state of depersonalization, and/or there are changes in brain chemistry and the nervous system (Blackmore 1993). Some have postulated that the discarnate entities or divine beings encountered on the other side are colored by the socio-cultural context (Kellehear

1996); though proponents maintain that in spite of this there is a common core of similarities. Some have said that falls or accidents where a person thinks he is about to die, but survives, can cause analogous out-of-body experiences and panoramic reviews (Russell Noyes 1972, 1977). Not everyone who is dying reports near-death experiences; many and people who are *not* dying report having them. Sleep paralysis and hypnopompic and hypnagogic dream states are factors in common out-of-body experiences. Ronald Siegel (1981) maintains that similar NDEs can be induced by hallucinogens. Karl Jansen (1996) has presented evidence that they can be stimulated by the dissociative drug ketamine. Various conditions can precipitate an NDE, such as low blood sugar, oxygen deprivation, reduced blood flow, temporal-lobe epilepsy, etc., and can lead to an altered state of consciousness. For skeptics, in no case can we say that the person has died and returns; what we are dealing with is the process or belief that one is dying.

Analytic philosophers have pointed out additional serious conceptual difficulties in the hypothesis that nonphysical beings are communicating with us—there is a sharp mind/body dualism here. Perhaps the real question is not whether there is sufficient evidence for “x,” but the meaning of “x”; and whether we can communicate with “disembodied entities” who have a level of consciousness without sensory organs or a brain. Some have claimed that the communication is “telepathic,” but the experimental evidence for telepathy is itself questionable.

## Conclusion

After a quarter of a century in this field of research, I find that eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable, and that unless carefully controlled studies and standards are applied, people can deceive themselves and others into believing that almost anything is true and real—from past-life regression and extraterrestrial abductions to satanic infestations and near-death experiences.

What should be the posture of the scientific investigator about paranatural survival claims? Clearly, we need an open mind, and we should not reject *a priori* any such claim; if claims are responsibly framed they should be carefully evaluated. After a century and a half of scientific research, what are we to conclude? I submit that there is insufficient reliable or objective evidence that some individuals are able to reach another plane of existence beyond this world and/or communicate with the dead. As far as we know, the death of the body entails the death of psychological functions, consciousness, and/or the personality; and there is no reason to believe that ghosts hover and haunt and/or can communicate with us.

I realize that this flies in the face of what the preponderance of humans wish to believe, but science should deal as best it can with what *is* the case, not with what we would like it to be. Unfortunately, scientific objectivity today has an uphill battle in this area in the face of media hype and the enormous public fascination with paranormal and paranatural claims.

## Notes

1. Currently based at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

2. “Religious Belief in America: A New Poll,” *Free Inquiry* 16(3) (Summer 1996), pp. 34–40.

3. Religion News Service, April 13, 2000.

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