

Going Beyond Physics: A Twenty-First Century Challenge to Christian Parapsychology

"I was thrown out of college for cheating on the metaphysics exam; I looked into the soul of the boy sitting next to me..."

- Woody Allen

Metaphysics and the Soul

I'm sure there should be a rule that says that you're not allowed to dissect a joke. But Woody Allen's cheating-in-the-metaphysics-exam joke deserves to be an exception to any such rule: not just because it's very funny but also because it's very clever. In fact, it's funny *because* it's clever. For one thing, we don't have metaphysics exams any more – not even within the vast mainstream of Western education. But more than this, it is the very nature of metaphysics that helps deliver the joke's ultimate payoff. For metaphysics – literally 'beyond physics' - tries in many and various ways to go beyond what our senses reveal to us concerning reality in its quest to discover the nature of *ultimate* reality. It says that beneath – or over or under or behind – the appearance of physical reality there may be another, deeper, reality; one distinct from sensible appearances and deserving of study.

So, for example, physics tells us that all that exists is material: the 'stuff' of the physical universe, from the tiniest atom to the biggest star. And that includes us. But metaphysics allows for the possibility that there is more to reality – and, by extension, to us - than this, and that in addition to our bodies there is something else as well. A soul, perhaps.

And this is the crux of Woody Allen's joke. In the very exam that might be expected to deal with the existence and nature of the soul, Woody cheats by looking into the soul of the boy

sitting next to him. It's the ultimate crib sheet: the existence of one of the very things that metaphysics tries to explain, and one which any metaphysics exam might be expected to be very concerned with.

Death and the Soul

Many of Woody Allen's jokes deal with death, dying, and the soul. In another very well-known joke he says that he doesn't fear death: he just doesn't want to be around when it happens. But as funny as these sorts of jokes are, they raise profound questions for which Christian Parapsychology may be in a good position to provide answers. For if all there is to us – and, by extension, to the whole of reality – is just physical, then we cannot help but be around when we die. Moreover, if reality is solely comprised of what is physical and can thus be measured, metaphysics as an academic discipline would cease to have any validity whatsoever. It would simply be dealing with what did not exist, and it would therefore be pointless to study it.

Yet it is one of the founding tenets of Christian Parapsychology that there exists a large body of information in the form of testimonies, claims, hypotheses and arguments that, combined, presents a strong case for supposing that there *is* more to life than what we can measure and more to reality than what our senses can reveal. And that goes for human beings too.

Consider, for example, this testimony of a lady who, longing for a child after a miscarriage, walked 'in near despair' down a country road with a high bank topped by a tall hedge on one side in order to do some shopping in a nearby village. 'Suddenly', she writes:

I was enveloped (I can only call it that) and lifted high above the high bank and tall hedge on top, as though by unseen and unfelt hands, [and] enveloped in a wonderful, living, brilliant light. I saw a small deserted quarry or cutting below, but everything, plants, bushes, even the stones on the far side were exuding a pulsating life and bathed in an unearthly bright golden light. It seemed an eternity I was held aloft with the most wonderful glow of peace and awareness of the wonder of God.

Then I found myself standing on the road and looked to see if anyone had seen me, it was so vivid, no-one was in sight. I walked on, to the shops, but with an unutterable feeling of peace within me. My longing for another child just disappeared.

This account is just one of many thousands currently held in the archives of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, and I have reproduced it word for word. It is remarkable both for its strangeness and its vividness of detail. But after telling us what happened on the day that her despair was lifted, the writer adds an even more remarkable postscript:

A few days afterwards, as the bank and hedge were too high to look over, I found by going up a side path I could look down, and it was as I had seen it, only the scene was just normal. We were newcomers to the area, and I had never wondered what was behind the high bank and hedge.

In Search of Explanations

What might this account be telling us about the nature of reality and of human beings?

Physics by its very nature is a naturalistic discipline, and it is usually the case that naturalistic explanations of the universe leave no room for anything above or beyond nature. So if we believe that a naturalistic way of viewing reality should have the final word in any explanation of this experience we might conclude that the lady had a particularly vivid visual hallucination. In other words, that for a brief period of time she was deceived into thinking that she had been raised high above her body by invisible hands and shown a temporarily transformed landscape. We might also go on to conclude that the experience was so

profound and moving that it led to the end of her despair and its replacement by a wonderful feeling of peace.

And indeed, there is a whole sub-branch of neuroscience - known as 'neurotheology' – that is devoted to the attempt to explain all religious experiences in terms of what we know about the brain's neural wiring. A neurotheologian might therefore start by assuming – as much neuroscience does – that our consciousness is simply a product of our brains. He or she might then go on to assert that we know exactly which part of our brains is responsible for maintaining our normal sense of where we are located in space. It is, in fact, the superior parietal lobe, which constantly maintains our awareness of our boundaries: where we end, in other words, and where everything else begins. Our neurotheologian might then go on to assert that during her brief experience the lady actually experienced a temporary interruption to the normal functioning of her superior parietal lobe leading to a temporary 'dissolving' of her normal sense of where she was located, and that this, in turn, explains why she felt herself 'lifted out' of herself. We might also expect our neurotheologian to be aware of the considerable amount of neurotheological literature which contends that the limbic system is unusually active during some episodes of religious experiencing, and that he or she would also know that it is this part of the brain that 'tags' experiences as intensely meaningful. Thus, our neurotheologian would have an explanation not just of this lady's temporary 'escape' from herself but also of why she felt that it was meaningful: and hence, perhaps, why she felt transformed by it.

Neurotheology and the Soul

This neat explanation leaves no room for the argument that she actually experienced a temporary separation of her soul from her body on that memorable day. In fact, it disallows

any such notion in its opening assumption that everything we consciously experience can be explained in terms of brain processes, and it then proceeds to locate those processes and to reveal how they explain her total experience. The problem with reasoning like this in the case of this particular experience is that it fails to explain what the lady subsequently discovered. As we have seen, in the 'postscript' that she adds she makes clear that sometime later she found a side path that enabled her to see what was behind the high bank and hedge and, sure enough, it was exactly how she had seen it during her experience, except that it was 'just normal'. Her closing assertion – 'We were newcomers to the area, and I had never wondered what was behind the high bank and hedge' – gives the distinct suggestion, surely intentional, that this was the first time she had physically seen or even wondered about what was on the other side of the bank and hedge. Yet when she was able to check what she had seen during her experience she discovered that what she had seen was, in fact, accurate.

At this point a neurotheologian might conclude that this aspect of the lady's experience lay outside his or her scientific remit altogether. He or she might, for example, appeal to research that shows that memories are composed retrospectively and conclude that she might have – perhaps unconsciously – convinced herself that what she saw when she took the side path and was able to check her earlier observation tallied with what she had seen then. In other words, that it was not her brain but her memory that deceived her. There is little way that this assertion could be tested, but is notable that once again it is one born of a naturalistic way of viewing the world, whether it should turn out to be true *or* false.

Overall, it seems that the assumptions we bring to our reading of this lady's experience – and, by extension, to any claim to have had a religious or spiritual experience – dictate in fundamental ways how we will interpret it.

Questioning Reality

The following experience also raises profound questions about the fundamental nature of reality and the assumptions that we bring to our experience of it. It is another account taken from the Alister Hardy archive and was submitted by a retired nurse who was attending to a sick aunt and who shared her bedroom during the final stages of the aunt's illness. The nurse writes:

In 1937, while still teaching, I nursed my father for five months. He died of cancer in 1966. When I learned that my aunt (mother's sister) who was one of our family, aged 84 years, was a cancer victim, I was appalled at the thought of having to nurse her. Now retired, I was able to devote myself entirely to my nursing duties which this time lasted for three months.

One night I settled my [aunt] patient for the night and sat down in my chair near her bed, with my back to the window.

Why, I do not know, but my eyes seemed drawn to the corner of the room. There, at the top of the wall, shone a small light which slowly grew in size and brilliance. I could not withdraw my gaze but I had no sense of fear. I determined to be quite practical and made myself look out of the window, thinking that an outside light might be reflected in the bedroom but there was no outside light. I sat down again and kept my eyes on the light. I have never, before or after, felt such a sense of peace and comfort. I felt a powerful presence in the bedroom and I knew that I would be given Divine strength to carry on with my duty to the end. I felt an exhilaration, a peace and well-being and I knew that I had been given a manifestation of God's care for me, unworthy though I was. I went to sleep, calm and reassured, knowing that the burden was no longer mine.

At first sight this seems to be an experience very unlike the one we have previously considered. There are no out-of-body 'perceptions', for example, and the circumstances appear to be very different. But upon closer inspection there are, in fact, marked similarities. For one thing, both experiences appear to take place when the experiencer is in a state of some distress. It will be recalled that the previous account described an event that occurred when the subject was in despair and here the nurse is 'appalled' at the prospect of

looking after her aunt. Both experiences also appear to have been utterly transformative. We recall that in the previous account despair was seemingly banished completely in the wake of the experience, to be replaced by peace and the cessation of longing for another child. Here, the writer makes specific reference to peace, comfort, exhilaration, strength and well-being, all apparently arising from her encounter with the light, together with calmness and reassurance 'that the burden was no longer mine.'

And there is another similarity as well. For, as with the previous account, this one too has a sequel. We take up the nurse's story again:

There was an unexpected sequel to my experience.

On the following night, when I had again attended my patient, I noticed that she did not, as usual, close her eyes. I followed her gaze and was surprised to realise that she was staring up above at the very place where the light had shone for me. I asked my Aunt what she was looking at. She replied: Nothing.

I said: Come on. Tell me. What do you see up there? She replied: I'm not going to tell you. It's a secret.

My aunt died a few days later. I am convinced that we were both, however unworthy, privileged to be granted this manifestation of Divine help in our hour of need.

I can assure you that none of the above is due to imagination. I am a very practical person.

This experience raises profound questions concerning the nature of reality, and does so at a number of levels. That the light was the source of such peace and comfort suggests that it somehow possessed personality. In fact the writer speaks of a 'powerful presence', further implying that what she saw and felt was no impersonal force but somehow embodied what were recognisable as personal qualities. How can such a thing be in the absence of anything approximating a physical brain? In fact, here too we are reminded of the account which we considered previously, for it appears that in both instances we are presented with evidence of something like consciousness existing outside of any kind of physical body. Naturalistic

ways of viewing the world cannot, of course, permit the possibility of such. Yet religious experiences of the sort we have been considering present real challenges to such an assumption.

Of course, the response might be made here that the stress of nursing the aunt in her final days caused the retired nurse to hallucinate. But the sequel to her experience which she provides gives some grounds for concluding that the aunt saw the same light that she did: in the same place on the following night. And this would be odd if it was a simple hallucination, because such things tend not to be shared. Again: the assumptions we bring to these sorts of accounts can powerfully dictate the way we read and understand them. And yet at the same time the content they contain throws out real challenges to purely physical ways of understanding the universe; suggesting, as it does, the possibility of a deeper reality which underlies it.

In Search of the Soul

Given the sort of evidence with which Christian Parapsychology has to deal, it seems clear that sooner or later the need to challenge assumptions about what is real will arise. In fact, this might well turn out to be the single, biggest, challenge that we face as an organisation: particularly given the way that young people are increasingly taught to think in the West in the twenty-first century. I teach Philosophy at a Sixth-Form College in the Black Country and by the time they arrive at the college at sixteen years of age virtually every young person in my class has formed the view that mind and brain are one and the same, and that you cannot have anything even approximating the former in the absence of the latter. In fact, many accept this and other naturalistic ways of viewing the world as givens and often defend naturalism vociferously as a consequence. If they are right then Woody Allen could

in no way cheat in his metaphysics exam by staring into the soul of the boy sitting next to him and of course he'll be there when he dies.

But the case is by no means closed, as the experiences we have considered in this paper have hopefully made clear. And they can be multiplied many thousands of times, on the basis of what is contained within the Alister Hardy archive alone. Metaphysics may no longer be on the syllabus in the vast majority of our educational institutions, but the potential realities with which it deals are surely too important to be assumed to be untrue, and the evidence for them is too numerous to be denied. To cast such evidence aside as unworthy of investigation is surely a too-cheap capitulation to the spirit of the age. It is surely time to restate the case for realities beyond this physical world, and Christian Parapsychology is in an excellent position to do so.

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