

DISCARNATE ENTITY

The term "discarnate entity" refers to any nonphysical being without a material body. It is, therefore, a broad term encompassing a variety of different spiritual and nonphysical beings, from spirits of deceased humans to incorporeal deities who never occupied a physical body, malignant demons, and interdimensional extraterrestrial intelligences. Discarnate entities may be encountered in a variety of different ways: in dreams, in hypnagogic and hypnopompic states, via shamanic journeys and spirit mediumship, or through the ingestion of psychoactive substances, among numerous others. In his pioneering experimental work with the highly psychoactive compound DMT, for example, Rick Strassman was surprised to find that at least half of his participants claimed to have made contact with entities while under the drug's influence. Strassman's participants reported encounters with a range of entities, including beings that resembled clowns, reptiles, mantises, bees, spiders, cacti, and stick figures. Discarnate entities may also take on a variety of other forms, from ghostly apparitions and shadow-like figures to fairies, angels, and luminous entities of light. They may also have no discernible form at all. They may be recognized as the spirits of deceased relatives or friends, or appear as hideous hag-like creatures, as frequently occurs during sleep paralysis. They can make themselves known by interacting with physical objects, as occurs in alleged poltergeist cases; through natural phenomena, such as the wind or lightning; through uncanny coincidences; or through direct mind-to-mind communication with sensitive individuals, shamans, or mediums. They may even make themselves known through moments of inspiration, as in the tradition of the daimonic muse. Discarnate entities may also be summoned or invoked to carry out tasks, usually through the performance of specific rituals, incantations, and spells.

Discarnate entities are thought to inhabit invisible worlds, sometimes conceived of as parallel dimensions. Traditional Celtic fairy lore, for example, describes a land known as Tir-Na-Nog, or the "Otherworld," which is inhabited by the fairy-folk

and other supernatural beings. Many traditional belief systems posit the existence of some form of “spirit world” that is co-existent with the physical world. Among the Campa people of Peru, for example, the world is conceived as consisting of a series of layers arranged one above the other, with each layer inhabited by its own class of beings, generally visible only to the shamans. However, not all discarnates necessarily originate in parallel worlds; the paranormal investigator John Keel, for example, coined the term “ultraterrestrial” to refer to supernatural entities native to the planet earth.

There have been many scholarly attempts at explaining the widespread belief in discarnate entities. The pioneering anthropologist Sir E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), for example, coined the term “animism” to refer to this belief, which he held to be the most basic form of religion. Tylor reasoned that the belief in supernatural beings arose from the misinterpretation of experiences such as dreaming and trance states. He argued that early humans might have mistaken their meetings with deceased acquaintances in dreams for real encounters with real people. From such experiences early humans posited the existence of a nonphysical component of the person that could continue to exist after the death of the physical body. Tylor further reasoned that primitive humans expanded this idea out to other aspects of the world, attributing spirits, or souls to animals, plants, and other natural phenomena such as the wind, lightning, mountains, rivers, and the sun, among many others, which often seem to possess a consciousness of their own. Sociological explanations, following the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, suggest that spirits, gods, and other discarnate entities are socially constructed and represent little more than focal points for collective worship and belief. Through worshipping or believing in the same spiritual beings, a social group is able to develop its own sense of identity, and so the solidarity of the group is reinforced. Psychological explanations are very similar in that they suggest that belief in discarnate entities arises out of a psychological need for stability in a transient and unpredictable world. Supernatural beings provide psychologically satisfying explanations for natural events, illnesses, fortune, and misfortune. Cognitive explanations suggest that belief in the existence of discarnate entities is the product of misinterpreted or misunderstood normal cognitive processes. A good example would be the human propensity to see faces in clouds. Cognitive anthropologist Stewart Guthrie has suggested that belief in supernatural beings arises from a failure to understand that such cognitive processes are hardwired into our brains (perhaps as by-products of natural selection) and that such observations do not necessarily mean that there are actual entities out there in objective reality. More recently cognitive anthropologist Justin Barrett has coined the term “Hyperactive Agency Detection Device” (HADD) to refer to these innate cognitive processes, which, he suggests, give rise to beliefs about disembodied intelligences.

This, of course, flies in the face of the traditional beliefs of a very wide proportion of human cultures, which hold that discarnate entities are real and play a significant role in everyday life. In considering whether these ideas are simply

to be brushed aside as “primitive” and “irrational,” or whether they might instead hint at a deeper ontological truth, it is important to note that there is also a body of parapsychological literature that suggests the possibility that discarnate entities may be ontologically real. In particular, some of the most recent experimental work on spirit mediumship appears to point toward the possibility that mediums may actually be in touch with the spirits of the dead, and if this is indeed the case then it opens up the possibility that there may be other forms of nonphysical, discarnate intelligence.

Jack Hunter

See also: Angels; Apparitions; Demonology; Ghosts; Mediumship; Spiritualism

Further Reading

- Evans, Hilary. 1987. *Gods, Spirits, Cosmic Guardians: A Comparative Study of the Encounter Experience*. Wellingborough, UK: The Aquarian Press.
- Hunter, Jack. 2012. *Why People Believe in Spirits, Gods and Magic*. Newton Abbott, UK: David & Charles.
- Strassman, Rick. 2001. *DMT: The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.
- Turner, Edith. 1993. “The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4 (1): 9–12.
- Voss, Angela, and William Rowlandson, eds. 2013. *Daimonic Imagination: Uncanny Intelligence*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.