

Believing Impossible Things: Scepticism and Ethnographic Enquiry

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Alice laughed: 'There's no use trying,' she said; 'one can't believe impossible things.' 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

Alice in Wonderland

Whether we identify with Alice or the White Queen may well rest on the semantics of the word 'impossible'. If something is impossible it is by definition illogical to believe in it, but one person's impossible may not be the same as another's.¹ Views of how the world works and how it is expected to behave vary across cultures and over time, as well as during the life course of an individual. We are shaped by our culture, including language, religion and ideology, our intellectual environment, family and friends, and by our own direct experience and reflection upon it. Western academic culture is a child of the Enlightenment, and although it contains within it many approaches, disciplines and points of view, there is a strongly hegemonic belief in a form of reductionist materialism (Hanegraaf, 2012) with well policed borders designed to keep at bay 'magical' and illogical forms of thought. I use the term 'belief' advisedly as this is an ideological and not a rational or scientific position (Sheldrake 2012). In anthropological studies this ideology is manifested in the urge to explain away or provide a rational account of the supposedly irrational beliefs of others, whether through a sociological, psychological or biological reductionism. Taking an emic or insider view of what one studies is permitted as reportage but the ethnographer is expected to make clear his or her intellectual distance from the illogical, improbable and fanciful beliefs and explanations of others. The taunt that the researcher is 'going native' is to question his or her intellectual and scientific credibility (with concomitant damage to their career prospects).²

But do we really need to choose between a rather rigid form of Western scientific materialism and the relativistic free-for-all that comprise the beliefs and practices of most of the world's populations? Can we combine the virtues of Western Enlightenment thinking with its disciplined examination of evidence and rejection of superstition and credulity, with a more expansive and all-embracing world-view that allows for seemingly 'impossible things'? Can we find an approach that retains academic rigour while also

admitting that not all reality is immediately apprehensible and visible? There seems to be plenty of actual evidence that the world does not work on strictly Newtonian principles, and we might therefore admit the possibility that alternative explanations might have some validity.³

Aaron Joshua Howard (2013:2) is not alone in critiquing the distancing project of much anthropology as a form of signification that ‘hearkens back to the oppression and hegemony that legitimated the expansion of Western imperialist rule’ while reinstating ‘the primitive versus civilized dualism upon which this reign depended’. Howard calls for an anthropological study of religion that allows for the possibility of supernatural realities, ‘an allowance for a transcendence that cannot be solely attributed to humanistic origins’ (ibid. p.1). Methodologically this involves an open dialogue with one’s research subject and subjects (Bowie, 2013), and the refusal to close down any particular line of enquiry prematurely, or to predetermine the nature of experience. It allows for the possibility that others know and understand the world in ways that may seem unlikely, but which may nevertheless be legitimate, or contain seeds of a reality beyond the norms of our everyday experience. A Western positivist education, with its critical scepticism, can serve us well in examining evidence rather than ignoring or excluding uncomfortable data. It can allow the same generosity to people who talk of dialogues with the dead or possession by spirits as to physicists who talk of particle entanglement and unimaginable distances between galaxies, of fields of conscious energy and universal information systems. Attempts to unify the data of religion, parapsychology and physics may not convince everyone, but all these disciplines are evolving, and often seem to be forging a common, or at least mutually hospitable, language.⁴ One reason given for ignoring supposedly anomalous data is that we do not have an explanation for a phenomenon (however unevenly and selectively this dictum is applied in science and medicine). The quality and quantity of research in fields such as biology, parapsychology and physics, among others, does appear to be steadily narrowing the gap between conventional science, the findings of parapsychology and religious belief.⁵

Anthropologists have often reported, or even more often experienced but not reported, so-called anomalous events that are consistent with the world-view of the people they study, but at odds with a Western positivist framework. Edith Turner’s sighting of a visible spirit form leaving a sick woman after a healing ceremony in Zambia is well known (Turner 1992), as is Paul Stoller’s life-threatening encounter with sorcery in Niger (Stoller and Olkes 1987). These personal experiences may be transformative, undermining a view of the world in which such things simply don’t happen. More often

they seem to be relegated to a separate category of ‘things without obvious explanation that happen in the field’, which are not permitted to impinge unduly on the the ethnographer – as with Evans-Pritchard’s strange tale from the 1920s of seeing an unexplained light, interpreted by the Azande in the Southern Sudan as witchcraft, travelling to the hut of a man who was found dead the following morning (1976). Evans-Pritchard rationalized that it could have been a man carrying a torch, but does not appear very convinced by this explanation. When such experiences happen in far-away places, and can at least be understood within a coherent cosmology of a non-Western ‘other’ they are not too threatening, and might even be expected. When African, Native American or other non-Western anthropologists write of spirits, powers and forces that intrude into their lives and shape reality, this too is tolerated within academia. They have, after all, been shaped by such cultural beliefs and practices, even if ‘benefiting from’ a Western education.⁶ What happens, however, when anomalous events are reported from within Western societies? The only acceptable academic approach seems to be to explain them away or more or less subtly dismiss them and ridicule those who ‘believe in’ such impossible things. Simon Coleman found that even researching something as mainstream as Christian Evangelicals in Sweden was enough to rouse suspicions in Cambridge anthropological circles that he might somehow become one of them (and by implication lose academic credibility), a reaction that he would almost certainly not have had if he had studied Christianity in Africa or Asia (Bowie 2003).⁷

This raises methodological questions concerning the nature of evidence, the role of experience and the persistence of scepticism and denial among scholars when faced with a challenge to their worldview. In this chapter I review some of the possible reasons for dismissing uncomfortable and ‘impossible’ data. The context is a discussion of physical mediumship in a contemporary Western setting. In many ways physical mediumship – the production of physical phenomena, from moving objects within a room, producing noises and voices, spirit lights, apports (objects that appear or disappear from the séance room), to full physical materializations, usually through the use of ectoplasm, should be one of the most straightforward ‘impossible things’ to verify, or to expose as fraudulent. Physical mediumship is repeatable in strictly controlled settings, and many of the best physical mediums working today are, like their Nineteenth and Twentieth Century predecessors, willing to undergo repeated and uncomfortable procedures, such as routinely being searched, bound and gagged before going into trance, in order to deflect accusations of fraud and trickery.⁸

Grounds for belief in ‘impossible things’: Evidence from physical mediumship

The claim that ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof’ has variously been attributed to Marcello Truzzi, Carl Sagan and even David Hume. The idea that proceeding by assertion is insufficient and that the burden of proof rests with those who challenge a dominant paradigm is not in itself particularly controversial, although it is worth pointing out that most currently accepted scientific understandings of the world were at one time rejected by the establishment as improbable and lacking evidence (Friedlander, 1995, Silvers 2003). What qualifies as an extraordinary claim is also relative, based on ideology as much as observation, changing radically over time. Having said that, for many Westerners in the Twenty First Century claims concerning an extra-physical or ‘paranormal’ realm qualify as extraordinary. What counts as proof, however, is contested and it becomes evident that for some ‘professional’ sceptics evidence is not really the issue as the boundaries of what is accepted and what is rejected have been established *a priori*. The admission of evidence becomes irrelevant.

Anthropological investigation is not immune from this approach, but as a discipline that methodologically seeks to understand the ‘native’s point of view’ it is at least in theory open to new information that adds to our understanding of the world and of what it means to be a human being within it. The phenomenological method in religious studies, the interpretive turn in anthropology, and postmodernist approaches in general, are shy of making ontological claims. To entirely bracket out questions of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ can, however, appear as a form of ethnocentrism rather than liberal open-mindedness. Behind the refusal to engage with another’s reality often lies a confident assertion in the implicit rightness of one’s own (Western positivist) interpretation of the world. I have argued elsewhere (Bowie 2013) that we need to seek a balance between a critical appreciation of the data before us, using whatever analytical tools may be at our disposal, and an ability to suspend judgment and try to experience the world through the hermeneutical lens of those we seek to understand. The outcome will always be a provisional, positioned and, one hopes, dialogical understanding of the phenomenon and people we are studying.

Physical mediumship

Physical trance mediumship challenges many taboos of Western society. It offends religious traditions that are nervous of the occult, and falls foul of Biblical prescriptions of the avoidance of mediums, witches and psychics (Leviticus 19:31, 20:27; I Chronicles 10:13-14). Mediums are generally motivated by ethical concerns, primarily in helping to

alleviate the distress of bereavement by helping people contact their loved ones who have died. Removing the fear of death by ‘proving’ the continued existence of the soul or of the individual personality is another often quoted reason for engaging in mediumship. Curiosity about life’s great questions, and more prosaically a desire to expand our understanding of the boundary between Newtonian laws of matter and psychic realities also play a part in physical mediumship. In some cases there is a pedagogical element, as in the conversations described by Di Nucci and Hunter (2009) between a spirit known as Charlie and sitters at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, or between the spirit of William Cadwell, materialized by trance medium David Thompson, and sitters at Thompson’s séances.

Those who practice physical mediumship and attend séances do not necessarily see themselves as performing a religious act, and there is not the same association between physical mediumship and formal religion that we see in Christian Spiritualist churches, where the predominant mode of engaging with spirits is through mental or clairvoyant mediums (Skultans 1974, Wilson 2013). The Society for Psychical Research (SPR), with its headquarters in London, UK, has since its inception in 1882 sought ‘to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis’. This has often included detailed studies of physical mediums, with the results published in their *Proceedings* and *Journal*, both of which reproduce this statement of intent. As the members of the SPR include a role call of distinguished mathematicians, physicists, medics and statesmen, their scientific investigations and subsequent reports are also intended to be within the scientific arena. This has been a red flag to those who, for various reasons, wish to contest the notion that the claims of physical mediumship have any basis in reality. I will briefly discuss the nature of physical mediumship and its claims, and then look at some of the cultural and psychological reasons that might account for the rejection of these claims and the evidence on which they are based, by those who describe themselves, and are sometimes pejoratively described by others, as sceptics.

Physical mediumship is a broad term used to designate the production of physical phenomena by a medium, usually entranced, with the help of the energy of a group of ‘sitters’ and a spirit team. A key feature of physical mediumship that distinguishes it from mental mediumship - in which the medium is generally the only person who sees, hears or receives impressions from the spirit world, is that the phenomena produced are objective:

that is to say, they are to all intents and purposes based on reality – everybody present is able to see, hear and feel such manifestations as they occur, and the phenomena themselves can be recorded on audio tape or photographed under favourable conditions for posterity, thus proving that the experience is not the result of over-active imagination (Foy 2007:vii).

Robin Foy, quoted above, was one of the four core members of the Scole Experimental Group, who conducted a five year study into the possibility of communication with discarnate intelligences at the Foy's home in Scole, Norfolk, in the early 1990s. Over 99 different types of physical phenomena were recorded, with different mediums. These included some of the more traditional features of the séance room such as the production of moving lights in a darkened room, independent movement of an aluminium 'trumpet', a variety of sounds, water being splashed on sitters, sudden and dramatic changes in temperature, voices with distinct personalities who could hold an intelligent conversation, the production and disappearance of objects such as coins and crystals (apports), the formation of apparently solid objects, such as flowers, which would then disappear again, ectoplasmic limbs, the impression of pictures on blank film and electronic voice communications. The complexity of the phenomena produced built up gradually over time as the spirit team and sitters worked together to improve communication, and find new technologies to aid it (Solomon 1999).

Trance mediumship

Trance mediumship is a particular, and rather rare, form of physical mediumship in which the medium, always by definition in a deep trance, specialises in the production of a substance known as ectoplasm (said to be made up of physical substances from the medium's body, which can be manipulated energetically by experienced spirits). Initially a trance medium may display transformations, visible in red light, during which an ectoplasmic energy layer over the medium's face is manipulated by the spirits to change the appearance of the face. The spirits may speak through the medium's vocal cords, changing the tone and character of the voice. A further stage of development involves the production of an ectoplasmic 'voice box', enabling the spirits to speak from anywhere in the séance room. A further development includes the use of much larger quantities of ectoplasm to fashion limbs or complete bodies, which can appear solid and interact with sitters, before dissolving back into the medium's body. The production of full manifestations is relatively rare (and risky for the medium), requiring many years of

training and patience by the medium and a regular group of sitters.⁹ During séances with trance mediums a range of other physical phenomena also take place.

Unbelievable as physical mediumship and the goings-on of the séance room may sound, physical mediums have been studied and subject to tests for fraud for over a century. The Massachusetts housewife and trance medium, Leonora Piper (1859-1950) was studied intensively for twenty-five years (Tymn, 2008, 2013). While in trance Mrs Piper was taken over by a number of ‘controls’, in particular a spirit who described himself as a French doctor called Phinuit. The control acts as a partner to the medium, and has to enter an equivalent ‘trance’ state from the ‘other side’ in order to speak through the medium. When not possessing the, the control acts as a gatekeeper for other spirits who are permitted to enter and use the medium’s body. Mrs Piper by all accounts had her off-days, but was also capable of offering substantial evidential information to sitters that could not be explained by cold-reading (guesswork), telepathy, prior research or general knowledge. The doctor, psychologist and philosopher of religion, who also founded the American Society for Psychical Research, William James (1842-1910), called Leonora Piper his ‘white crow’, i.e. the exception that disproves the general rule. Trance mediums who produce ectoplasm that can be used by spirits to create solid bodies, or partial bodies, have routinely been strip searched, sometimes sewn into special clothes, bound and gagged before and during the séance. The séance room is routinely searched and independent observers asked to check it for hidden devices. In other words, the possibility that the phenomena of the séance room are the product of a magician’s conjuring trick is generally eliminated. While no doubt extremely uncomfortable for the medium, such precautions are accepted both to rule out fraud for the medium’s own protection, and to convince sitters of the reality of the communications from the other side.¹⁰

The Felix Experimental Group

There appear to be developments in trance mediumship as the technology and experience of both investigators and mediums on the one hand and spirit teams and discarnate communicators on the other, increase over time. The Scole Experimental Group had access to photographic and recording technology, for instance, that was not available to Mrs Piper. The Felix Experimental Group (FEG) founded by trance medium Kai Muegge in 2004 in Frankfurt, Germany, has had remarkable success in not only enabling spirit forms to manifest using ectoplasm from the medium’s body, but photographing the process in red light conditions (<http://felixcircle.blogspot.co.uk>). Academic researcher,

Professor Stephen Braude (recently retired head of philosophy at the University of Maryland),¹¹ has been investigating the FEG since 2010. According to a report on the Felix Circle website (above, accessed 2.10.2013), Braude and a team of four other investigators and a filmmaker, arranged a final controlled investigation of the FEG over the period of a week in an Austrian farmhouse in May 2013. The measures put in place to eliminate the possibility of fraud were similar to those I witnessed at a séance with trance Medium David Thompson at Jenny's Sanctuary in England in August 2011.¹² The FEG account of the experiment¹³ outlines the safety protocols followed, which included:

- 1) A location that had not been disclosed to the medium in advance and no additional sitters.
- 2) Full control by the scientists of a permanently locked séance room, and scrutiny of all preparations by the medium or his wife in the séance room.
- 3) Repeated checks and searches of the room, all objects brought into the room and people who entered the room. These included a full strip search of the medium, Kai M. and his wife Julia by Braude and a physician. The medium and his wife were kept separate before and after the strip search.
- 4) The medium was guided to the séance room by two controllers, one in front and one behind, while holding his hands in the air.
- 5) During the séance when full table levitation occurred the researchers kept full contact with the hands, knees and feet of both the medium and his wife.
- 6) When an oral apport was announced by the medium his mouth was checked with white light torch and bright red light, while his hands and feet were held.
- 7) When the medium announced the imminent appearance of an apport in midair above the table, his hands were held and checked repeatedly in red light.
- 8) The medium's body was checked by a physician during the production of ectoplasm.

Despite these controls, which because of the additional stress they caused the medium might be expected to reduce the likelihood of success, several paranormal events were observed and filmed in red light. These included apports into the séance room – a crystal the size of a finger and a large piece of copper, full table levitation, considerable amounts of ectoplasm from the medium's mouth that morphed in to different forms, including rudimentary limbs, heads and faces, and which wrapped itself around the medium like a cocoon. As Braude (2007:12) has pointed out, it is one thing for magicians or others to claim that such phenomena are possible through magical performance, it is quite another

to demonstrate that this is so under similarly carefully controlled conditions. To date this has never, to my knowledge, been attempted.

Fraudulent mediumship

All mediums I have heard or spoken to, whether mental or physical mediums, warn against the possibility of fraudulent mediumship, so one can only conclude that whether through innocent self-deception or intentional deceit, fraudulent practices can and do occur where the checks, such as those described above, are not in place. While it is hardly credible that a medium will sit for years with a small group of people to develop his or her mediumship – generally at great personal and financial cost, rather than for any obvious gain – with the intention of fooling the gullible, there does appear to be a temptation to cheat on occasion. The pressure on the medium may be greatest when expectations have been raised as a result of previous successes, and the medium does not want to disappoint the sitters or admit to waning powers. There may also be more complex issues, and perhaps we sometimes ask the wrong questions in our search for ‘the truth’. As Edith Turner (1992) observed in relation to the removal of objects from patients in spirit healing, there are often two elements, the psychic and the material, that are not separated in the minds of peoples for whom the psychic level is a reality. When the shaman or healer sucks a harmful spirit, energy or object out a patient, and ‘captures’ it within a bone, sticks, leaves or some other substance, the material becomes the ‘home’ for the psychic energy. Edith Turner observed this with the Ndembu healer, Singleton, during the *ihamba*, when a hunter’s tooth was removed from a female patient, and was then put in a pot and fed on red meat to prevent it from troubling her again. Turner saw something leaving the patient with her own eyes, and could only attest that her experience of the healing ritual did not align with an account based on assumption of trickery, even if the relationship between the gray blob that Turner observed and the tooth is not straightforward or clear.¹⁴

Jeffrey Kripal, discussing the trance medium Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918), who was known to ‘cheat’ on occasions, also points to the sometimes blurred lines between fact and fiction, stating that:

it is almost as if the real needs the fake to appear at all, *as if the fact relies on the fiction to manifest itself, only to immediately hide itself again in the confusion of the fantastic hesitation that follows*. Put a bit differently, it is not as if the appearance of the sacred can be reduced to a simple trick, as if the shaman is just

a sham. It is as if the sacred is *itself* tricky. Even the well-documented medical placebo, after all, is a fake that has real effects [italics in the original](2010:52).

Kripal is reminded of a conversation with the physicist and psychical researcher Russell Targ, who as a young stage magician became aware that whilst performing a mentalist trick on stage, he began receiving genuine telepathic messages. ‘The trick was a trick, but it was also, somehow, catalyzing the real deal (ibid.)’. It might be simpler if there were always a clear dividing line between what is real and what is not, between fraud and trickery on the one hand and truth and honesty on the other. We do know, however, that there is a close connection between the physical, psychological and spiritual - if you smile when unhappy your body will produce the hormones that improve your mood, for instance (Wenner, 2009), so it is not too surprising that these boundaries *can* be blurred in the case of mediumship as well.¹⁵

Is there a place for scepticism in ethnographic enquiry?

When I undertook a study of Christian missions in Cameroon for my doctoral research the first question I was invariably asked upon my return from the field was, ‘Well then, are they good or bad?’ We are so used to polarised positions, or to avoidance of the question altogether. Instead of one black and white question one might ask, ‘What does “good” mean in this context?’ ‘Good for whom?’ ‘What are the positive and negative effects of mission on different individuals and groups, both historically and today?’ While these questions might yield more promising and nuanced answers, they were still the wrong questions from my perspective. I wanted to study relationships and dynamics, the intersection of belief, experience and practice. I sought to document the historical events and context in which missionaries were invited to work in rural Africa, and how different actors perceived their joint history. I have to admit, however, that I did start with the naïve assumption that the Bangwa and Mundani peoples would have a view on whether the missions were ‘good’ or ‘bad’. After all I had been educated with the same dualistic mindset as my interlocutors back home. The question made no sense to my informants, not because they also wanted to discuss the sociological and ethnographic dimensions of their relationship with the missions, but because the answer was so obvious that it rendered the question meaningless. The universal response to such a question, accompanied by a look of bewilderment, was ‘We have suffered’, followed by descriptions of long, often fruitless treks over mountainous forest tracks to the nearest health clinic, carrying the sick and dying, or while heavily pregnant. They talked of the

lack of educational opportunities, of the absence of infrastructure and a cash economy, of feeling abandoned by the state and of a crushingly high infant mortality rate that threatened their development and survival as a people. Yes, life was better with the mission. It was on this foundation, and on their own terms, that the Bangwa built their future (Bowie 2009).

There is a parallel with sceptical enquiry in ethnographic studies of the paranormal. We are culturally primed to ask, or at least think in terms of, true/false questions and then when, as good liberally-minded phenomenologists, we find them too difficult or threatening, to avoid them altogether. The tradition in the anthropology of religion is to ask not, 'Is it real?' 'Is it true?' but 'Who are these people and why do they think or imagine that this or that is true or real?' We resist passing judgment, often on the explicit or implicit assumption that the beliefs and interpretations of others are self-evidently ridiculous. We may remain unaware of the patronising neo-colonial message such an approach signals for our informants. It *does* matter to trance mediums and their sitters whether the phenomena they produce are the result of genuine mediumship or trickery. The stakes are high. Either there is an afterlife, and in certain circumstances those who have crossed over can continue to communicate with and influence the physical world, or there is not. If there is an afterlife do we have evidence for it, or does it remain in the field of pure speculation, imagination and faith?

Proving the continued existence of individual consciousness is generally an important stated aim of mediumship. People who have experienced evidential communication from someone who has died, or who have had a near death or out of body experience, usually claim to lose their fear of death. One of the patients studied by Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick typically reported that her near death experience,

left a very positive view and comforting understanding of the whole process of death and dying, particularly the moment of death. I know now that there is nothing to fear, it is such a peaceful and graceful moment, and it has proved to me, beyond a doubt, that the spirit or soul does exist, outside of the body: I saw it! (Fenwick 2008:242).

Ethnographers walk a narrow line between empathising with and trying to see the world through the interpretive lens of another's culture and keeping their critical faculties sharpened. The anthropological task of cultural translation involves being able to step back from a particular view of the world and set it alongside their own and that of others,

particularly the academic other. Finding the balance between emic and etic views, and moving between them is what ethnography and anthropological interpretation is all about. What is sometimes lost in the process is an acknowledgement (despite the generally positive push in this direction of nearly half a century of feminist writing) of the culturally determined ‘baggage’ and strictly policed boundaries of academic discourse. Coming to judgment, honestly and self-consciously aware of one’s own standpoint and perspective, is a crucial part of ethnographic engagement. Some people have a more naturally open accepting disposition, others a more critical and sceptical one, but in either case a sincere effort to chronicle what one sees, hears, experiences and thinks is a prerequisite to the production of good ethnography. In answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section, ‘Is there a place for scepticism in ethnographic enquiry?’ we must answer affirmatively. But there is a caveat, it should be a scepticism that is open to the data, flexible enough to change its mind, and courageous enough to document honestly even seemingly impossible events.

This may all sound obvious, but as Jeffrey Kripal wrote in his summary of Dean Radin’s two books, *The Conscious Universe* (1997) and *Entangled Minds* (2006), there are three sociological facts when it comes to the relationship between science and parapsychology, namely:

(1) there is massive ethnographic, historical, cross-cultural, and now, scientific evidence that puts the existence of psi phenomena well beyond any reasonable doubt; (2) this data has been collected, analysed, meta-analysed and theorized, not by naïve enthusiasts, but by experimental psychologists, university-trained humanists, Nobel Prize-winning physicists, highly classified government military programmes, and elite corporate think tanks (some of which are already quietly proceeding to pursue new psi-based communications technology); and finally (3) despite all of this, parapsychology remains the favourite target of ideologically driven sceptics who insist on reverting to a predictable series of gross stereotypes and shaming techniques, mostly professional ridicule, to keep intellectuals interested in these matters sufficiently silent (Kripal, 2012:xxxii-xxxiii).

These tactics are, as Kripal notes, effective, helped by a largely hostile media and the gate-keeping role of an extreme form of scepticism acting as gate-keeper to academic employment, advancement and publishing. In the final section of this chapter I therefore look in more detail at the nature of scepticism and its influence.

The psychology of scepticism

One of the great triumphs of the Enlightenment is arguably the expansion of knowledge made possible by the replacement of dogma and superstition with a rational, scientific view of the universe. All things were open to investigation by experiment and observation, and it seemed as if the human mind had replaced religious dictate as the source of true knowledge. Parapsychological research has, on the whole, regarded itself as a child of this Enlightenment tradition, and as often as odds with established religion as the men (and less often women) of science. To the surprise and frustration of many, the accumulated evidence of more than a century of serious effort, generally sufficient to convince those who undertook the studies, has failed to change the dominant materialist scientific paradigm. Many academics repeat and sincerely believe that there is no solid evidence of the survival of consciousness, or paranormal phenomena in general (such as mediumship, telepathy, clairvoyance or precognition). It follows that people who claim to have psychic powers must be fraudulent or mistaken. Such views are often held with vehemence and in ignorance of the research and practice of mediums and psychic researchers. An unsolicited email from someone who had read the short report I published on-line of the séance I attended with trance medium David Thompson surmised that I must either be gullible or out to make money from it. The correspondent described himself as ‘open-minded’ but the notion that such things could occur was evidently too far outside his view of the world to accept.¹⁶ This attitude represents what Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007) referred to as a ‘reality tunnel’. We all see the world through the lens of our subconscious mental filters and experience, and either fail to notice or rationalise away what does not fit with our view of reality (1983). Michael Polanyi (1891-1976), did more than most to bridge the gap between science, social science and philosophy. He was influenced by Lévy-Bruhl’s writings on ‘primitive rationality’ and Evans-Pritchard’s work on Azande witchcraft, oracles and magic (first published in 1937) in his insight that our language, social and conceptual frameworks influence the ways in which we interpret the world. If we think and reason within a particular ‘idom’, logical inconsistencies may go unchallenged and unnoticed – another version of Wilson’s ‘reality tunnel’.¹⁷

Cognitive dissonance

The white crow argument (that disproves the axiom that all crows are black) often put forward by those who study the paranormal is rather difficult to refute. If, however, you have a strong investment in all crows being black, and feel that your world will be

dangerously threatened by the presence of a white crow, you are likely to react with irritation, hostility, fear or ridicule towards those who claim to have seen one. The observer might be mistaken or a liar. The bird might have been a seagull rather than a crow, or might have been tampered with – painted or perhaps genetically modified, a freak of nature. The basis of such reactions is summed up by the term *cognitive dissonance*, the idea that being faced with two contradictory situations causes discomfort. The more central the idea is to someone's core identity, the more painful the contradiction. The term 'cognitive dissonance' was coined by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter in their classic 1956 study of a UFO cult, *When Prophecy Fails*. The group in question had been told by means of channelled writing that the world would end on December 21st 1954, but that the faithful few would be rescued by a space ship at midnight on the December 20th. When no space ship arrived, and the expected cataclysm also failed to materialize, rather than decide they had been misled and abandon the cult, a channelled message was received to say that because of the faith of the few the end of the world had been delayed. Their reaction was to turn from secretive group to a proselytizing one. Festinger and his co-authors surmised that the cult members had invested too much in their beliefs, and they were too central to their daily lives, simply to abandon them. To relieve the dissonance felt when the prophecy was not fulfilled they took the measures of altering the prophecy to fit the circumstances, and trying to recruit more people to their beliefs in order to justify them.

A small UFO cult may be easy to dismiss, but the point is that we all experience cognitive dissonance when our core belief systems are challenged by conflicting data. Subsequent neurological studies designed to test for the presence of stress when cognitive dissonance is experienced have been linked to activation of particular areas of the brain. Van Veen et.al. (2009:1472), for example, concluded that 'our results are consistent with the action-based model of cognitive dissonance, which posits that conflict between cognitions evokes an aversive state because it potentially interferes with unconflicted, effective, goal-driven action'. They conclude their discussion with the claim that cognitive dissonance is an important concept in psychology because of its ability to explain and predict attitude change in a wide range of human behaviour, and that the dissonance caused can be mapped in the brain using an MRI scanner:

Our results shed light on the cognitive and neurobiological basis of dissonance, and indicate that the magnitude of conflict-related dACC [dorsal anterior cingulate cortex] and anterior insula activation predicts the subsequent attitude

change. This result supports the core assumption of dissonance theory, that attitude change in cognitive dissonance is driven by conflict. It is the basis for a neural prediction of attitude change. Our findings have considerable implications for understanding attitude change in a wide range of contexts in which cognitive dissonance theory has found broad practical application, including politics, marketing, management and the evaluation of psychotherapeutic interventions (2009: 1473).

We might adapt an explanatory diagram to illustrate this process in the case of physical mediumship. If the Element represents material spirit manifestations, this will conflict with a view of the world that holds that such things are *de facto* impossible, and cause anxiety. Consistency can be reconstituted by (1) changing one's beliefs and accepting that such manifestations do indeed occur, (2) by simply ignoring the phenomenon, (3) or by inserting new 'consonant buffer elements' (the manifestations were a hoax, a magic trick, an hallucination). The first option may be the most parsimonious but also requires the greatest change to the individual's view of the world and sense of self, and is therefore the one that demands the greatest psychological effort.

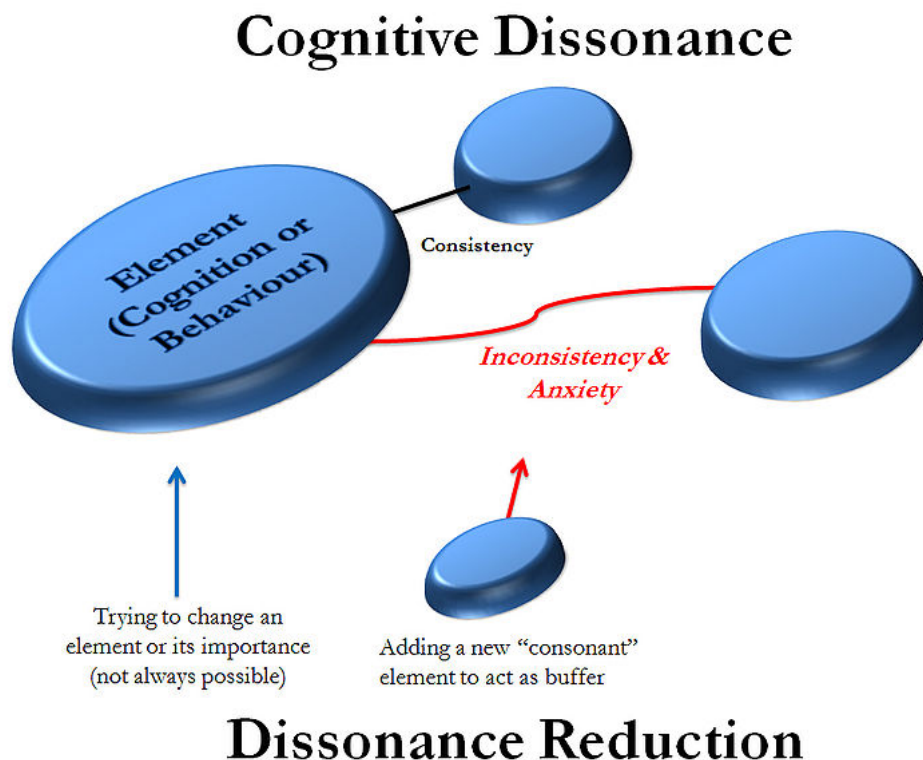


Figure 1. Source [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Mary Douglas, in her classic study *Purity and Danger* (1966) made similar observations, pointing out that anomalies may be treated in a variety of ways; redefined, eliminated, avoided, labelled as dangerous or elevated through ritual. The need to classify the world is basic to human social behaviour and affects every aspect of our lives. Anomalies are events or beliefs that cross-categorical boundaries. Much humour depends on the shock or irony of something being in the wrong place. Often, however, it is no laughing matter. Many countries have laws or regulations intended to reinforce a wide range of category boundaries around sexual orientation or religious adherence, or lifestyle choices for example. To contravene these rules may result in discrimination, incarceration or even death. If you have a category rule that states that everything that exists is equal to the sum of its visible or measurable material parts, and that every part of a living being is subject to the laws of entropy, any evidence of communication from those who have died will be anomalous. It might not see a very threatening idea, or even a rather encouraging and comforting one, but if you have invested large parts of who you are, and your understanding of the nature of the world in which you live in this rather simple materialist paradigm, it might appear dangerously destabilising. The vehemence and determination with which a relatively small number of people attempt to persuade others, often with great success, that all apparent paranormal activity is an illusion, points to an particularly acute form of cognitive dissonance. T.E. Lawrence described this attitude in himself before his death, describing it as, ‘a kind of masochism, a stoic resolve to punish the wishful thinking one suspects is behind any belief in immortality.’ He went onto explain that, ‘It feels very stern, strong and noble to deny the thing one secretly longs for, and so to prove that one is quite able to do without it’ (Sherwood, 1969:49). The psychological effort of living in the shadow of death when death is seen as obliteration, finality, the end of all life, may be such that it can permit no distraction. Death denied, ignored or faced stoically takes energy, and the apparent weakness of those who hold out false hopes of an eternal future present a threat to this carefully erected edifice. Certainly there are honest seekers who simply claim that the evidence does not stack up but then, to follow Albert Einstein’s famous dictum, ‘Not everything that counts can be measured. Not everything that can be measured counts’.

Pathologies of cognition

The pioneering psychologist and founder of transpersonal and humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), best known for his theory of a hierarchy of needs, identified twenty one ‘pathologies of cognition’, both intellectual and emotional in his

1966 book *The Psychology of Science*. Charles Tart points out that while Maslow focuses on science as a system of knowledge his comments are also applicable to pathologies of knowing and learning more generally. It is not only hard-line sceptics who are subject to these pathologies. They are tendencies we all have to a greater or lesser extent. For instance, rationalisation can be an obstacle to knowledge. In Tart's paraphrase of Maslow, 'The brain's emotional circuits often react and form a judgment before the more intellectual parts have even gotten the message that something's happening, something's being perceived' (2009:57). This would apply equally to both parapsychological investigators and hard-line sceptics. Other pathologies identified by Maslow apply more specifically to those who espouse reductionist materialism, such as 'Intolerance of ambiguity', which Tart summarises as 'an inability to be comfortable with the vague and mysterious'. People who dislike ambiguity often 'generalize or rationalize too soon or too broadly, or oversimplify by ignoring parts of reality' (ibid. 58). Arguably people who like to deal with unambiguous data will be more attracted to the sciences than to the arts and humanities, or to social and cultural anthropology, a discipline that deals more in questions than answers. Scientists may therefore be overrepresented in this personality type. Academics in general will recognise in themselves the pathology of 'Intellectualization', described by Tart in the following terms,

Our ability to step back from the immediacy of experience, emotion, and bodily agitation to take a broader, more logical view of a situation is one of the greatest powers of the human mind. But considering it as always being the 'highest' ability, or using it compulsively... in all situations for all knowledge seeking, is maladaptive (ibid. 59).

Of the twenty one pathologies of cognition outlined by Maslow, academics in general and scientists in particular are guilty of or susceptible to a greater number than members of the general public as their (our) reputations and sense of self are so closely bound up with the life of the mind and professionalization of knowledge. Those who claim to be open to new data and interpretations, and in most cases probably sincerely believe this to be so, can be the most rigid when it comes to admitting new, contradictory evidence.

Science then, can be a defence. It can be primarily a safety philosophy, a security system, a complicated way of avoiding anxiety and upsetting problems. In the

extreme instance it can be a way of avoiding life, a kind of self-cloistering. It can become in the hands of some people, at least, a social institution with primarily defensive, conserving functions, ordering and stabilizing rather than discovering and renewing (Maslow, 1933:33, cited in Tart, 2009:54).

Given these tendencies we should not be surprised that the boundaries between an ordered predictable world and one of seemingly impossible things is so keenly and emotionally defended.

Pseudo-scepticism

One of the frustrations for many of those who engage in serious parapsychological research or, in the case of anthropologists, tend to remain silent concerning their findings and interpretations when they fear that these might expose them to ridicule, is the studied ignorance of many of those who pose as sceptics. To ask questions, look for alternative explanations, and to re-examine material and conclusions is a healthy and productive form of scepticism. We need, however, to have a degree of competence in a field in order to evaluate the data coming out of it. Many academics are guilty of claiming the authority of ‘science’ to prognosticate on matters well beyond their area of expertise (and the media love it). This does a great disservice to science, which should be at the forefront of furthering knowledge - especially at the boundaries of the known and knowable – and to the general public, who are misled concerning the status of knowledge. Charles Tart is one of many investigators who has had experience of debunkers or pseudo-sceptics who ‘are sometimes high-status scientists in other fields, but [who] don’t bother to actually read the published reports of the experiments in parapsychology’s refereed scientific journals, much less get their hands dirty by doing any experiments themselves’ (2009:67). In other cases the sceptic will admit that he or she is wrong when challenged, but go on to repeat their discredited point in the next interview or article.¹⁸

The weight of expectation

A final comment in this section concerns the relationship between experience and expectation. Some of those who attended David Thompson’s séance with me in August 2011 had been to one or several of his séances before, or had sat in other similar circles. Some were developing their own physical mediumship. Even those like myself who were newcomers were well prepared through what we were given read and through the pre-séance talk to know what to expect. How much weight should we give to these

expectations in determining what people thought happened during the séance? It would have been quite difficult for anyone to raise doubts about the process, if there were any, during the evening without seeming disrespectful or hostile. This is not to say that David Thompson or medium Christine Morgan, who acted as master of ceremonies, would not have been happy to deal with any specific issues - I had the impression that they would have, but there was no space for people to voice publically any alternative interpretations of events. I found the very banality of much of the content of the séance (and this is a purely personal reaction) contrasted strangely with the extraordinary, seemingly 'impossible' notion, that a medium, tied and gagged in a chair, was being used by those who had died to form full or partial materialized bodies, and to sing and speak to us clearly and loudly as they moved around the room.

While I do not think that the séance I attended was simply a theatrical performance I cannot be sure. As the séance was conducted in complete darkness it would be difficult, despite all the precautions, to completely rule out the manipulation of objects and production of sounds by people within the room to give the impression of spirit activity. The medium Stewart Alexander is well aware of this problem when he writes that 'it cannot be denied that one of the greatest weaknesses of the physical séance room has always been that generally manifestations are inhibited by the presence of any form or degree of light', and that 'quite understandably, such rooms have led many to suspect chicanery, although, irrespective of how it may appear, the total elimination of light is generally very necessary' (2010:243). David Thompson had three helpers present, Christine, Sarah and Drew, who could potentially have moved quietly around the room on stocking-feet (as we had all removed our shoes). By placing chosen sitters who were part of a conspiracy next to them, so that it was not revealed that they were not holding hands, they would have been free to move around. The ectoplasmic hands felt by some of the sitters could have been those of the helpers, and the voices pre-recorded or produced by someone outside the room, relayed via a hidden speaker – possibly lowered from the ceiling. The uniformly loud volume of the spirit guides, as opposed to the rather softer voices of the deceased relatives, could have been a function of the volume setting on a speaker. I have no doubt that a gifted magician could introduce objects into a séance room, and perhaps even reverse the cardigan of a man strapped to a chair. I say *could*, as there was no evidence of hidden microphones or speakers, and the room was thoroughly searched. The way the sitters were invited to converse with the spirits would make a pre-recording almost impossible to manage with any degree of realism without assuming the connivance of all those involved. Objections concerning the conduct of séances in the

dark, which is apparently a requirement for many mediums to produce ectoplasm, would not apply to Kai Muegge's séances, described above, which take place in red light. David Thompson's spirit team claim that they are working towards this, and there are photographs of Thompson producing ectoplasm taken in red light on his Circle of the Silver Cord website.¹⁹

I can well understand, judging from my own reaction, how easy it would be to simply ignore the events of the evening and get on with my life as if such things didn't and couldn't happen, to 'bracket them out', as they had no reference point with the rest of my life. There is evidence that people quickly often forget even dramatic anomalous events that find no place in their conceptual schema. Another reaction I experienced was a sense of anti-climax that there were no great spiritual revelations. Those who came back from the dead to speak to us had little to say that they could or would not have said when alive. But that is the point, they had died and the medium (with the help of his ectoplasm) *was* their message. They were present in the room, able to talk to us, and to reassure us that death is the great lie. It was the very physicality of the occasion that gave it its supposed veracity. The challenge to each of those present at David Thompson's séance was that if death is not the end, what are the implications for the way we live our lives? Perhaps it is this challenge that often gives the sceptical response its messianic fervour.

Conclusion

William James struggled with the tension between his scientific training, with its measured, rational approach to religion, and the evidence before him of seemingly 'impossible' things. His conclusion after many years of investigation, published in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, was that:

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in (2008:376).

It was not that James was no longer able to put himself 'into the sectarian scientist's attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all', but that whenever he did so he would hear his 'inward monitor'

whisper the word ‘bosh’. Without claiming to have all the answers, or even to know the right questions to ask, the consistent experience of many of those who have observed, studied and been unsettled by ‘impossible things’ is to admit the reality of a world in which seemingly impossible things are in fact possible. It is not a world at odds with science, but certainly expands far beyond a narrow materialism. As James concluded:

Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow ‘scientific’ bounds. Assuredly, the real world is of a different temperament – more intricately built than physical science allows (James, *ibid.*).

The time lag in absorbing the extraordinary discoveries of modern science, both among many scientists, who admit they rarely read outside their narrow field of expertise, in the media and general public, is part of the issue. Theoretical physicist Henry Stapp notes that:

The tremendous difficulty in reconciling consciousness, as we know it, with the older physics is dramatized by the fact that for many years the mere mention of ‘consciousness’ was considered evidence of backwardness and bad taste in most of academia, including, incredibly, even psychology and the philosophy of mind (2011:139).

The scientific method with carefully replicated experimentation, and acceptance of new discoveries in theoretical physics, mathematics, cosmology and biology, should in theory shift Western conceptions of the possible away from a fixed Newtonian materialism. Some of the reasons why this is such a slow process have been explored in this essay. Anthropology as a discipline that has both scientific and humanistic pretensions ought to be well placed to bridge the gaps between religious and mystical beliefs, alternative cultural views of reality and empirical scientific research. These need not be at odds with each other and the denial of reason is not required in order for us to expand our understanding of the possible. As we live in a culture that accords the priority of truth to science I will give Stapp the last word:

But where reason is honored, belief must be reconciled with empirical evidence. If you seek evidence for your beliefs about what you are, and how you fit into

Nature, then science claims jurisdiction, or at least relevance. Physics presents itself as the basic science, and it is to physics that you are told to turn. Thus a radical shift in the physics-based conception of man from that of an isolated mechanical automaton to that of an integral participant in a non-local holistic process that gives form and meaning to the evolving universe is a seismic event of potentially momentous proportions (2011:140).

If mediumship and the phenomena of the séance room are to find a more general acceptance it will be from the perspective of this non-local, holistic understanding of human consciousness and materiality. Ethnographers can readmit the extraordinary and impossible tales of others within this more expansive, shared understanding of reality.

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Notes

¹ There is analogy here with the use of the term 'miracle', which assumes a certain natural order that is transgressed, an idea that similarly depends on a particular cultural view of the natural. I have discussed this at greater length in Bowie (2011).

² Psychic investigator and writer, Lawrence LeShan states the problem thus: 'Impossible events do not occur. Therefore, if a scientist is faced with the fact that an impossible event has occurred – or daily fare as psychical researchers – the paradox must be resolved. This can be done only by redefining reality in such a way that what was previously impossible now becomes possible. If the theory must bow to the brute

fact, we must be clear as to what is the theory and what is the fact. The paranormal event is the fact. Our definition of *reality*, which decides for us what is possible or impossible, is the theory' (2009:63).

³ See, for instance, the discussions of paranormality and academic approaches to anomalous phenomena in Cardeña, Lynn & Krippner (2007), Kakar and Kripal (2012), Kelly & Kelly et al (2010) and Escolar (2012), as well as the mediating work of writers such as Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and Fritjof Capra (1975, 1982).

⁴ See, for instance, the detailed occult science of the Theosophists writers and mediums Anne Besant and Charles Leadbeater, whose 1908 volume *Occult Chemistry: Investigations by Clairvoyant Magnification into the Structure of the Atoms of the Periodic Table and Some Compounds*, influenced the work of Francis Aston, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1922 (Hughes 2007), and a summary of scientific evidence for a conscious universe in Radin (1997). See also Hagelin (1987) on parallels between consciousness and unified field theories in physics.

⁵ One might cite, for instance, the work of Bohm (1980), Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011), and Stapp (2011) in the physics of consciousness; Tart (2009) on scientific evidence for parapsychological claims, and Davies (2013) and Beauregard and O'Leary (2007) on encounters between theology, spirituality, culture and neurobiology.

⁶ See, for instance, Sarangerel (2000), and Some (1994).

⁷ There are a number of accounts within the anthropological literature of anomalous experiences that cause the ethnographer enough disquiet to unsettle normative paradigmatic ways of thinking, at least for a time. See, for instance, several of the articles in De Vita (1992) and Young and Goulet (1994).

⁸ For a succinct account of contemporary physical mediumship see Hunter (2013).

⁹ There are many accounts of physical mediumship, and of some of the best known more recent trance mediums, able to produce ectoplasmic materialisations, e.g. Findlay 2010 [1931], Brealey 2008, Halliwell 2008, Harrison 2008, Harris 2009, Alexander 2010. In addition to descriptions of the Scole Experiment (Solomon 1999, Foy 2007), there are transcripts and descriptions of trance mediums and physical phenomena on the websites of the Circle of the Silver Cord

(<http://circleofthesilvercord.net>) and Felix Experimental Group (<http://felixcircle.blogspot.co.uk>).

¹⁰ Such precautions did not prevent the trance medium Helen Duncan (1895-1956) being tried as a fraud in 1933 and under the Witchcraft Act in 1944 – after unsettling the authorities as she appeared to possess details of top secret military operations, passed on through deceased members of the forces to their families (Brealey 2008).

¹¹ Stephen Braude is an experienced researcher and recorder of anomalous phenomena (Braude 2003 and 2007).

¹² Details of this séance are given on my [Exploring the Afterlife](http://exploringtheafterlife.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/materialisation-seance-with-david.html) blog, <http://exploringtheafterlife.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/materialisation-seance-with-david.html> and [Academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu/2186310/Material_and_Immaterial_Bodies_Ethnographic_Reflections_on_a_Trance_Seance) website, http://www.academia.edu/2186310/Material_and_Immaterial_Bodies_Ethnographic_Reflections_on_a_Trance_Seance.

¹³ <http://felixcircle.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/physical-mediumship-under-strict.html>
Accessed 2.10.13.

¹⁴ Turner (1992: 165-7) cites Lévi-Strauss' account of the Kwakiutl shaman Quesalid in Canada (1977:445-53) and Michael Harner's account of shamanic healing among the Jivaro in South America (1980:113-34) as examples of power objects, like the *ihamba* tooth of the Ndembu, that act as bridges or intermediaries between 'shamanic' and 'ordinary' states of consciousness.

¹⁵ A fascinating post-script to the notion of fraudulent mediums is the so-called 'Philip Experiment'. In the 1970s the Toronto Society for Psychical Research created a fictional character they called 'Philip' and sought to communicate with him in a traditional séance setting. After a year of regular sittings they were able to produce physical phenomena such as rappings and table levitation, and eventually direct communication with Philip. The experiment has been repeated several times with similar results elsewhere. There a range of possible explanations for this, ruling out fraud, which seems improbable, including the notion that the collective energy and expectation of the group alone was able to produce measurable and observable phenomena, that they created a semi-material 'thought form' that had some autonomy, or that they attracted and channelled another or other discarnate communicators who played along with the Philip deception. What is clear is that they

were not communicating with an actual deceased individual who had lived the life described, as Philip was an intentionally anachronistic fiction (Owen, 1976).

¹⁶ Stewart Alexander (2010:248-9) divides sceptics of Spiritualism into three types, the most common being those whose views are based on ignorance of the subject. The second type he calls the ‘informed sceptic’ who, despite over 150 years of research, is not convinced. The third is the immovable ‘fixed view sceptic’ who is so sure that genuine mediumship does not exist that they lambast anyone who claims otherwise. This third type of sceptic is very vocal and active on the Internet. They often serve as the ‘professional media sceptic’, called in to give a ‘balanced’ view whenever programmes on the paranormal are broadcast on radio or television. This problem is hardly new. In the first decades of the Twentieth Century psychological researchers bemoaned the opposition of ‘official science’, particularly psychology, to the accumulation of evidence from well-trained, scientific researchers into paranormal phenomena (Coover 1927).

¹⁷ A fuller discussion of Polanyi and Evans Pritchard can be found in Richard Werbner’s ‘Comment’ in *JRAI* (2013).

¹⁸ A good example would be the debate between Rupert Sheldrake and Richard Wiseman over the dog, Jaytee, who could predict when his mistress would return home (described in Sheldrake, 1999). A detailed description of the differences between Sheldrake’s and Wiseman and colleagues is set out on Sheldrake’s blog (Accessed 4.10.2013): <http://www.sheldrake.org/D&C/controversies/wiseman.html>.

¹⁹ See David Thompson’s web site and blog, The Circle of the Silver Cord, <http://circleofthesilvercord.net>, for accounts of séances, recordings and photographs.