

# Prospect

## Issue 6 / March 1996

### Matter over mind

#### **Anthony Gottlieb admires a rigorous refutation of belief in the paranormal**

ANTHONY GOTTLIEB

ANTHONY GOTTLIEB IS ON THE STAFF OF THE ECONOMIST. HE IS WRITING A HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY FOR PENGUIN.

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The house magazine of America's most indefatigable debunkers, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, once printed a disconcerting letter from a reader. You people, the reader complained, are like boy scouts holding hands round a campfire and reassuring each other that there is nothing out there. He had a point. If sceptics are so sure that the flapping curtain conceals no bogeyman, why do they spend so much time poking it with sticks?

Professor Nicholas Humphrey has a novel solution to the problem of how to deal with supernatural beliefs. He realises that it is no good condemning them as merely stupid: they are too widespread for such a verdict to be convincing. For example, a typical study in England in 1987 suggested that 88 per cent of people believe in some paranormal phenomena. This study did not even include traditional religious tenets such as the belief in life after death, which 71 per cent of Americans and 43 per cent of Europeans have signed up for and which Humphrey puts in the same paranormal drawer as Uri Geller's bent spoons. Humphrey also sees that sifting through the evidence for, say, extra-sensory perception, and exposing its flaws, is a tactic with limited usefulness. There is always some new study which overcomes the problems which invalidated previous efforts. So, instead, Humphrey offers a calm diagnosis and a universal refutation.

His diagnosis is plausible and goes like this. All magical beliefs rest in one way or another on the idea of mind over matter. Whether it is imparting or receiving information, stopping or starting watches, seeing into the distant future or past, the paranormal mind is marked by its power to override forces by flipping a spiritual switch. Supernatural phenomena are those which claim we can transcend the limitations of our physical embodiment.

As a psychologist, Humphrey is well equipped to discuss the arts of self-deception. The evolution of the brain may also shed some light on the factors which feed superstition. Humphrey mentions the intriguing idea that a tendency to see imaginary connections between events is a by-product of the vital ability to discern patterns in

the world. Perhaps our disposition to overestimate the improbability of certain events, thus leading us to infer a cause when there is really only coincidence, is a form of "better safe than sorry" strategy.

Diagnoses of paranormal belief are appropriate only if these beliefs are indeed false. The most successful part of Humphrey's all-encompassing refutation of them is his use of what he calls the Argument from Unwarranted Design. It is, he demonstrates, a recurring feature of purported evidence for paranormal abilities that these abilities appear only in very restricted circumstances and with a curiously circumscribed range of effects. Why could Clever Hans, the famous German horse who could tap out the answer to sums with his hoof, only answer questions to which someone within his field of vision knew the answers? The hypothesis that Hans could do arithmetic does not explain this limitation. The hypothesis that he was merely picking up visual cues about when to stop tapping, can. Why could Uri Geller bend only small and relatively pliable objects and not, for example, pokers or coins? Why did he have to touch them first, and why with his fingers rather than his toes?

After thousands of years of purportedly paranormal phenomena, the believers have not come up with a single theory which could be put to the test. If belief in the paranormal is simply the view that certain things have not yet been explained, then it is one that every sceptical rationalist shares. But if it is rather the belief that certain things can be explained only by paranormal means, then where are these explanations? With no theories to test, what exactly do psychic experimenters think they are up to?

The paranormal is in fact the most intensively researched of all subjects, for every single orthodox experiment is a test of mind over matter in which mind fails to deliver the goods. If supernatural abilities were genuine, they would produce countless inexplicable anomalies in ordinary scientific work. Such arguments will not change the mind of any determined believers; neither will anything else in Humphrey's book-that would take a miracle.

Soul searching

Nicholas Humphrey

Chatto & Windus ? 16.99