

NON-PHYSICALITY AND MEANING IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY:

To Teach An Old Science New Tricks

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Abstract: After relating some facts regarding J.B. and Louisa Rhine's interest in and conception of method in parapsychology, the author explores the feasibility of appropriating some epistemological aspects of the "soft sciences" and the humanities for use in parapsychology.

Introduction. When I first received notice of this conference I reacted somewhat strongly to the subtitle "A Search for A New Science". I suffer from an untutored prejudice that science is equal to most tasks put before it. While I know this borders on scientism, I don't think that I idealize the level of understanding that normal science has shown regarding the ineffable, the mystical, the creative or the paranormal. On the other hand, the fault doesn't necessarily lie with science herself. The problem is largely one of tunnel vision; we tend to talk and work as if there were only one science, "hard" science. This habit devalues the conventional soft sciences. The research traditions of the humanities suffer even more.

I have often wondered why "scholarly" behavior in the humanities is not considered comparable to "empirical" behaviour in the sciences. With the exception of laboratory manipulation the processes are very much the same. But because our common understanding of science is a limited one the specific subset of laboratory behavior is valued more highly than virtually any other empirical behavior.

In a paper which addressed the demarcation problem, Mario Bunge talks about cognitive fields, i.e., spheres of human activity designed to obtain, disseminate and use knowledge in meaningful ways.¹ Bunge divides these cognitive fields into two categories, "research fields" and "belief fields". These categories delineate, to Bunge, two distinctly different forms of cognitive activity.² The research fields are: formal science; basic science; the applied sciences; technology; and the humanities. Bunge classifies religion, political ideologies, pseudosciences and pseudotechnologies as "belief" fields.

Workers in the research fields observe, test, and reference previously accumulated knowledge, and attempt to discover lawfulness. Participants in belief fields may operate on received knowledge or inspiration, or may employ various scientific methodologies for the purpose of justifying certain presuppositions or beliefs. This latter statement, in part, defines pseudoscience.

If we accept Bunge's classification we are compelled to admit that psychical research and parapsychology have both stepped over the line into pseudoscience on occasion. In our defense may I say that it is not easy to address the interface of religion and psychical research, or the "religious" issue of nonphysicality without treading perilously close to Bunge's line of demarcation.

On the other hand, Bunge included the humanities in his list of research fields. As many anthropologists, sociologists, psychoanalysts and historians know only too well the club of science does not often extend its invitation to these softest of the soft sciences. Bunge, however, seems to think that disciplines that test hypotheses by observation, that describe the observed as carefully as possible, and that attempt to offer the most-well-supported generalizations, even though not laboratory sciences, are in some sense science too.

To digress a moment, let me relate a conversation I had recently with a venerable member of this Academy. This particular gentleman worked at Rhine's laboratory when he was my age. Upon hearing that I had submitted an abstract for this meeting he cornered me, wagged a cautionary finger and said: "Now, remember you are going to talk to the Academy. Please, don't be too Rhinean." I laughed. Because he was teasing me. Except that he wasn't really teasing me.

In psychical research, in experimental parapsychology, to be Rhinean means to be as "hard" science as possible. J.B. Rhine was our most thorough-going empiricist, a man who stepped into the individualistic arena of psychic science with its varied and sometimes antagonistic research programs and forged one pretty traditional-looking science. Rhine took our greater questions and reduced them -- some say ad absurdum. He systematically developed a simplistic methodology that seemed to work. He standardized terminology on the basis of his operationalisms and his generalizations. He revolutionized our field. But like most hard scientists who decry the soft approaches, Rhine developed a methodology that both ignored and devalued the subjectivity of the paranormal.

Before we embark on a complete recasting of science perhaps we should examine the interplay of Rhine's purposes -- which were inherently religious -- and Rhine's methods -- which were defiantly mechanistic -- so as to determine why we are left so unsatisfied.

The Science of the Nonphysical. First, let me state the "bottom line" on J.B. Rhine by quoting Laurie Huff's excellent paper, "J.B. Rhine and Parapsychology: A Human Quest",

"...Philosophers of science--Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Michael Polanyi, Paul Feyerabend, and others--willing to turn their critical powers upon their own academic endeavors -- have shown us (in a variety of

highly individual ways) ... [that] ... science must be recognized as a fundamentally human undertaking, one marked alike by bursts of creative insight and credulous folly, by dogged pursuit of knowledge and equally stubborn preservation of unexamined presuppositions, by heroic dedication and all-too-human fallibility.

Nor is science any less human when practised by its geniuses and pioneers; in fact, the work of these individuals often provides particularly eloquent testimony on behalf of the personal nature of scientific investigation. But one can admire the efforts of an outstanding researcher, the bearer of the metaphorical torch, not because the person's steps were firm and sure (as they seldom or never are), but because they were made in the first place."³

It is apparent in Huff's paper that, even when she is being critical, she has a deep respect for J.B. Rhine, whatever human failures she may subsequently identify. Her respect is tempered by an understanding of the magnitude of his contribution to American parapsychology and of the greatness of his spirit.

On the one hand, I share that deep respect most wholeheartedly. On the other hand, like Huff, I am not wholly comfortable with Rhine's emphatic claim to have proven the operation of something nonphysical in man, something that could obtain information and influence the physical world without any conceivable physical contact. This proof, for Rhine, seemed to be an undeniable proof of a soul.

Both J. B. and L.E. Rhine came from fundamentalist religious backgrounds. J.B., brought up in a variety of fundamentalist Christian sects, was set for a time on a course towards the Methodist ministry. Louisa's family were Mennonite, and although she never adopted "the garb", her views on religion, particularly on the varieties of Christianity besides her own, were very much influenced by her early training.⁴

J.B. and Louisa became neighbors in young adulthood. Because their minds were of a more serious cast than their peers, they occupied a great deal of each other's time with an arguing out of their differing religious beliefs.⁵ Eventually, as their lives became inextricably intertwined, they formed a tandem understanding of the spiritual in life, an understanding very much the result of a mutual hammering at ultimate questions.^{6,7}

In later years J.B. was likely to talk about nonphysicality and the relationship of religion to parapsychology as if the data accumulated through years of card tests and dice throws, of hundreds of case histories, had forced him to adopt his belief. It is obvious from their writings that both Rhines felt this to be true.⁸

However, whether they wanted to admit it or not, these ideas arose very early on and did not change much over the course of their lives. In 1916, 11 years before they came to Duke, 18 years before Rhine was to maintain that his data forced him to something of a spiritual conclusion, he wrote this to Louisa:

"... I hate the word 'mechanistic'. If G-d does not, has not, and will not perform anything out of the natural order of things, if He does not answer prayer, if Christ did not perform the miracles, real miracles, come from G-d and ascend to heaven, if there is no "love of Jesus" to preach, I may as well be... a fatalist, a cynic. But I believe they are true and I am going to prove to my reason the things that I feel." ... [author's emphasis]"⁹

The Rhines' identified for themselves, in a series of discussions which began in adolescence and continued throughout their lives, a central core of beliefs upon which they felt all religions and practices were founded:

"..The basic question for any religion is whether there is a spiritual factor in man. Without a positive answer to this question there would probably be nothing that could rightly be called a religion.... It means... something subject to principles that lie beyond the physical system of nature."¹⁰

This basic core centered around the theological concept of the soul. To determine whether some objective reality had given rise to this concept Rhine narrowed the theological idea to the "limited soul hypothesis"¹¹. This hypothesis postulated: that an aspect of man existed which operated in a universe not bound by physical laws (therefore a non-physical universe); that the abilities the soul would need to survive death, to communicate with the living, to influence the physical world after death must also be available to some extent in the living man; and that evidence to support the hypothesis should be found in properly conducted laboratory experiments testing telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis.

The methodology, impressed into service, after many lines were tried and abandoned, the data of which were used to address ultimate religious questions, was that of card-guessing and dice-throwing, and to a lesser extent experimental precursors of what is now known as free-response.

The paradox resides here. Huff said:

"...It is immediately clear that Rhine's work cannot be separated from his personal and philosophical concerns. His writings show an interest not merely in the "evidence", but in its wider

meaning, its metaphysical implications. The same sorts of questions that must have originally impelled him toward the ministry were to remain with him throughout his adult life...questions [that] focused on the ultimate, [the] profound ... mysteries of life. He wished to know nothing less than the true nature of human beings and their relation to the universe."12

The Uneasy Peace. To discern this relationship Rhine mobilized a passionate devotion to the scientific method. He felt that he could "beat behaviorism at its own game ... showing that anti-behaviourist conclusions could be arrived at on the basis of impeccably objectivist data."13 Rhine was so sure as he gathered his data that he had proved his point that he ceased to merely suggest that the theory of nonphysicality pointed to a spiritual side to man. He ceased to couch his statements in philosophically conservative or cautiously scientific language. Instead he talked loud, long, and decisively about his beliefs. Perhaps one of his strongest statements was:

"...The conclusion is inescapable that there is something operative in man that transcends the laws of matter and, therefore, by definition, a nonphysical or spiritual law is made manifest. The universe, therefore ... is one about which it is possible to be religious; possible, at least, if the minimal requirement of religion is to be a philosophy of man's place in the universe based on the operation of spiritual forces."14

But did Rhine understand religion in the sense that it is commonly understood? Did he understand either the nature or purpose of science as it was practised by his contemporaries, as we practice it today?

To borrow from Huff for one last time:

"Rhine's version of science ... was indistinguishable from the "mechanistic science" to which he was so opposed ... he placed himself in the odd position of trying to refute mechanistic science from within its own paradigm, using its own methods ... Rhine had some very strange ideas about the nature of "religion." At times, it seems he considered the term to be belief in a nonphysical reality ... Likewise when he applied the term to belief in a G-d with certain attributes (such as omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) such a definition was not even representative of orthodox doctrine, much less of religious systems in general ..."15

However, scientists can only proceed on the strength of their own convictions, and Rhine was sure that the experimental data he had amassed and continued to obtain pointed clearly and

unequivocally towards a nonphysical side of man. His methods improved with each passing year. His statistics were vindicated and still people seemed to know that which they should not have known, do that which they should not have been able to do, given the shape of the physics of the time.

Some religionists agreed wholeheartedly with Rhine's conclusions. In Christian Horizons in an article published in 1943, the following appeared:

"...Conclusive evidence issuing from psychological laboratories at Duke, Harvard, and other seats of learning, has firmly established the religious beliefs of centuries that man has extra-sensory powers ... The value of such research to theology itself, as a substantiating element ... [is] .. of inestimable value ... if the efficacy of prayer could be substantiated scientifically... It is the conviction of a growing number of people that if the genuinely Christian people of the world could only comprehend the power of thought they could use it 'as a lever of life the world' ..."16

The author of a pamphlet prepared for St. Paul's Cathedral that surveyed psychical research agreed with the previous writer but then ended his piece with an interesting comment, that unwittingly perhaps, contradicted Rhine's personal motivations:

"... I do not for one moment suggest [the writer stated] that psychical research can prove the truth of religion, still less be a substitute for it. I say that I think it can help us, and that for Christians simply to ignore it is foolish and faint-hearted."17

When one reads Rhine's writing, however, it becomes painfully clear that he did intend to prove the truth of religion, that he did seek to replace religion with a scientifically-based belief in the nonphysical. He even went so far as to say:

"The aim of religion is to provide, through its doctrine answers to the most fundamental questions about the nature of man and what he can do to control his destiny ... If parapsychology finds answers to the question for which religious doctrines have been developed in the past, there is no reason why these should not replace the earlier conceptions in much the same way that chemistry has replaced alchemy and scientific medicine has taken the place of the practices of prescientific days."18

While some religionists applauded this point of view,

others felt somehow insulted by Rhine's approach. Rhine seemed to be bent on devaluing faith, inspiration, the centrality of revelation and mystical knowing.

Reframing the Question: The most powerful argument against the theory of nonphysicality is, of course, that science can not, and should not, attempt to answer ultimate questions. Ultimate questions are belief-related, value-infused and emotionally-derived. Any science that attempts to "prove" beliefs or seeks to support statements of faith is a pseudoscience. Orthodox science certainly sees things that way.

But a variety of lesser arguments, none the less damning, exists within the literature of parapsychology itself. As stated in 1962 by Thouless, these arguments express wonder how we can presume to know so much about the physical world that we can feel justified in calling some observed behavior or ability nonphysical. Specifically, Thouless wrote:

"... When physicists come to accept the facts of parapsychology, they will try to think of a physical explanation of them. It is extremely unlikely that a successful explanation will make them fit into the system of the present physical expectations ... but ... can we be sure that some ingenious young theoretical physicist will not think of an explanation further .. from accepted orthodoxy than the modifications ... made necessary by ... the quanta effects? But how much further would it have to be in order that it could be called a non-physical principle of explanation."¹⁹

To a certain degree Rhine anticipated this argument, and maintained throughout his career that the concept of nonphysicality was a transient one,²⁰ and that he could not be expected to anticipate the future of physics -- that "physics could take care of itself".²¹ However, his habit of calling parapsychology the "science of the nonphysical", of drawing wide-ranging inferences from the principle of nonphysicality to religious beliefs, moral order, world peace and the American political ideology completely obscured whatever tentativeness he may have meant.

Now, in 1984, the quantum mechanical theories of psi are gaining ground.²² Experimental data seem to point to the direct effect of consciousness on the physical world. Claiming that psychokinesis is proof of 'nonphysicality', of some 'spiritual' influence can now be seen to be premature at best, meaningless at worst. The physical world, at the quantum level at least, is not so well understood that physical boundaries have been clearly drawn. How then can we reasonably speculate on what might lie beyond those indefinite boundaries? Consequently I am afraid that we have been left back at square one.

The original impetus for the Rhines' studies -- the strength of their personal beliefs -- was obscured completely by a methodology that ignored the underlying experience of the ineffable. This is the failure that the Academy so keenly feels. Just as beleaguered humanists often wonder "where the people went" when faced with the obliquely experimental reports of today's psychology, many psychical researchers have wondered, when confronted with Rhinean parapsychology's attempt to illuminate religion through experimental reduction, where the human experience that gave rise to religion was lost.

Conclusion. The Rhinean approach has had its success. We are somewhat closer to defining the limits of human sensory ability, somewhat closer to understanding how psi occurs, somewhat closer to delineating experimental conditions necessary for a modest variety of replicability. We have made progress on nearly every experimental front, but we are not more able to talk about the meaning of the paranormal in daily life, in the religious context, in the laboratory itself, than we ever were.

We need to shake off our tendency to adopt the methodology of "hard" scientists when the questions to which we hope to speak are inherently human ones. We need to adopt a scholarly approach, a soft science approach. But we do not need to reinvent the wheel. The methodologies of the humanities and those of the softest of the social sciences already exist and are available to us. Let us take informed advantage of these.

Those of us who are interested in whether or not the "psi component" exists in the religions of the world, can identify core concepts in a more empirical way than the Rhine's did. The writing and oral teachings of religions, and the branches of theology and anthropology that study them can be searched for a visible consensus. Once found we can ask: Is the Idea of a nonphysical reality central to many or all? Is a non-physical entity assumed? If so, what are its abilities? What experiences do religions point to as being "proofs" of the existence of such an entity. Are they current experiences, everyday experiences or historical myths and legends? Are they spontaneous or are they induced? Do experiences we would classify as "normal" figure heavily in these "proofs"? Do experiences that we would classify as "paranormal" figure heavily in these "proofs"? If a core religious experience is identified how does it relate to daily behavior, to the development and maintenance of moral systems, to practices surrounding life-changing and life-threatening events?

It is also possible to ask, as Patric Geisler has begun to do, whether psi functioning is found in more unusual religious environments, in shamanistic cults, for example, Geisler now actively addresses the question of the influence of shamanistic training procedures on experiences and abilities we would call paranormal.²³

Of immediate importance is a re-emphasis on field investigations along the careful and fruitful roads the near-death

investigators have recently been traveling, although without the trend towards metaphysical speculation.²⁴

A multivariate approach is necessary. Not only should we verify cases to as great an extent as is possible - and by verify I mean, not only to attempt to establish external collaboration but also to interview the experiencer carefully, in the best Stevensonian style. Also needed are personality indices, medical histories, clinical estimates of family interactions based on objective and systematized projective techniques, some information on the history of similar experiences occurring previously in the same families, and most importantly for the Academy, information on the religious beliefs of the experiencer, those of their families and any indicator of behavioral transformations caused by the experience.

Sociology has been developing a variety of case study methods, some of which proceed from evaluation research. There are methods that could be useful for us. Clinical psychology and psychiatry continue to develop objective and projective tests that can be extremely useful when used in a careful and conservative way. Also available are a variety of improved interviewing techniques. A survey of various literatures and methodologies could bring some extremely useful suggestions to us. Among that which might prove to be fertile ground are: the vast literature in psychology on the analysis of verbal reports, and on attribution theory; communication theory, particularly that which focuses on conversational analysis; and the methodologies developed to utilize oral history and personal documents for the purpose of more subjectively rich but empirically sound historical research.

In experimental parapsychology we are beginning to see something of this multivariate approach when we look at the "Participant Intake Programs" now in place at a few of the major experimental laboratories.²⁵ Extensive questionnaires are given to volunteers who take part in a variety of experiments over a relatively long period of time. Items in these questionnaires survey everything from demographics to religious beliefs, from personal habits such as frequency of dreaming and risk-taking behaviors to previous psi experiences. Eventually it may be possible to factor analyze the characteristics of both experiencers and experimental participants on a variety of personality variables, religious beliefs and practices, and values, as well as to pattern analyze for differences between those experiencers or experimental participants who provide good evidence for the paranormal and those who provide weak evidence. While any data so obtained would be incredibly complex, given the depth of computer data management systems now available to us they may not be hopelessly so.

Such work would proceed at a snail's pace, certainly. But when one imagines the writer's cramp Edmund Gurney of the SPR must have suffered during the verification of cases collected through the Census of Hallucinations; when one comes to grips with the magnitude of the life's work of Louisa Rhine, work

accomplished completely through correspondence and hand-tallies; when one surveys the equally enormous accomplishments of Stevenson; not to mention the new studies of Greyson and the like, ~~about~~ the help of a friendly and industrious computer, such an enormous task seems at least do-able.

And if someday the mechanistic variety of our experimental work succeeds in setting the permanent boundaries of the physical, so that some fearless soul in the distant future can reasonably theorize beyond them to the ultimate, the carefully preserved and analyzed testimony of human experience will not have been lost. The subjective details will be waiting to flesh out individual data points, to cast new light on long columns of statistical comparisons, and at last to provide meaningful commentary on the nature of man.

1. Mario Bunge (1982). Demarcating science from pseudo-science. Fundamenta Scientiae, 3, (3/4), 369-388. p. 373.
2. Ibid. p. 374.
3. Laurie Huff (1981). J.B. Rhine and Parapsychology: A Human Quest. Unpublished manuscript. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago.
4. Louisa E. Rhine (1983). Something Hidden. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers. pp. 6-14.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. J.B. Rhine and Louisa E. Rhine (1978). A search for the nature of the mind. In T.S. Krawiec (ed.), The Psychologists, Volume 3, Brandon, Vermont: Clinical Psychology Publishing Company. (181-205) pp. 184, 196.
8. "...the experimental results of these psi studies present phenomena from human life that require the rejection of the conception of man as a wholly physical system. This is simply to say that the acceptance of the occurrence of nonphysical finding of parapsychology today is necessarily to abandon any view of human nature dependent wholly upon physical principles." J.B. Rhine (1960). On Parapsychology and the Nature of Man. In Sidney Hook (ed.), Dimensions of Mind: A Symposium. New York: New York University Press. (71-77) p. 75.
9. Something Hidden. p. 18.
10. J.B. Rhine (1945). Parapsychology and religion (Editorial). Journal of Parapsychology, 9, 1-6.
11. J.B. Rhine (1947). The Reach fo the Mind. New York: William Sloane and Associates. p. 206.
12. J.B. Rhine and Parapsychology: A Human Quest. p. 7.
13. John Beloff (1974). Synopsis of "ESP and Altered States of Consciousness" by Charles Honorton. In J. Beloff (ed.), New Directions in Parapsychology. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press. p. 34.
14. Ibid. p. 185.
15. J.B. Rhine and Parapsychology. p. 15.
16. B. Roy Brown (1943). The new place of psychology in religion. Christian Horizons 5, 5-10. p. 5.
17. W.R. Matthews (19?) The Churches and Psychical Research. (Pamphlet. St. Paul's Cathedral). p. 8.
18. Journal of Parapsychology. p. 1.

20. "...Within the more fundamental confines of science itself the two aspects of reality [physical and nonphysical] now distinguished appear for the present at least to constitute areas whose interrelations themselves present new territory for the long future to explore ... This longer view brings us, even in parapsychology, to a novel emphasis -- in appearance almost a reversal -- an emphasis ... on the integration of psi with the physical order of the universe." J.B. Rhine and J.C. Pratt (1957). Parapsychology: Frontier Science of the Mind. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas. p. 73.
21. "The person who most often expresses reluctance to agree to the specified boundary line between parapsychology and physics is the speculative enthusiast who is already looking ahead to the physics of tomorrow...he will argue against calling anything nonphysical until the whole domain of physics has been mapped ... One cannot wait, of course, for further advances in physics or in parapsychology or any other branch of inquiry. It is necessary to take present knowledge, put it together as best one can, use the best working concepts available, and settle for whatever hypothesis can most soundly and simply explain the phenomena. The present conclusion, then, is that there is something in the psi-test results that calls for a type or order of reality beyond that which is physical -- an extraphysical one [author's emphasis]. Let the future of physics, like the future of parapsychology, take care of itself." New World of the Mind. pp. 121-132.
22. Evan Harris Walker (1975). Foundations of parapsychology and parapsychological phenomena. In L. Oteri (ed.) Quantum Physics and Parapsychology, New York: Parapsychology Foundation. Pages 1-44.
23. Patric Giesler (1983). A multi-method study of psi and psi-related processes in the Umbanda ritual trance consultation. Unpublished masters thesis. Orinda, California: J.F. Kennedy University.
24. Bruce Greyson (1982). Near-death studies, 1981-1982: A review. Anabiosis, 2, 150-158.
25. Pat Barker and Ephraim I. Shechter (1983). Characteristics of the Psychophysical Research Laboratories' Participant Pool. Paper delivered at the 10th annual conference of the Southeastern Regional Parapsychological Association, West Georgia College, Carrollton, Georgia, February, 1983.

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