

SUMMARY OF THE CONFERENCE

EMILIO SERVADIO

A man had been condemned to death. When he was requested to express a last wish, he said, "I'd like to learn Chinese." He might as well have said, "I'd like to summarize a conference." Summarizing a conference where fifteen papers have been presented and discussed, is, strictly speaking, a desperate task. However, many among us have got into the habit of trying desperate things such as parapsychological investigations, and this is why I have accepted this role in this conference.

As the subtitle of the conference is "The Continuing Doubts and Affirmations," my first idea had been to make a tentative classification of the papers and/or the participants according to whether they could be on the doubting or on the affirmative side. The first count has given me a score of ten to five in favor of the affirmations. Not at all a bad score. I was thus encouraged to go on with my divisions and distinctions and—from a more fruitful viewpoint—to divide the papers into two classes: those mainly dealing with methodology and techniques, and those mainly having to do with facts and experiments. I found that the methodological preoccupations formed an overwhelming majority.

This had, in fact, to be expected, as our conference has been purposefully set up to make us examine, criticize and revise our own work and instruments.

I would place in the methodological class the papers presented by Hansel, Mundle, Dingwall, Cutten, Hardy, Weiner, Roll, West, Ely, Hillman, and Cohen. In the Facts and Experiments section, those of Greenbank, Pahnke, Kanthamani and Herbert.

Of course, that is not a sharp distinction because some methodological papers contained factual information and vice versa. But as a first attempt at summarizing what has been going on, I think I am not grossly mistaken. I hasten to add that in spite of the aforesaid main difference and of their quite different themes, all of the papers have shown one common feature: the need to be critical or to revise our

tenets and our positions, and at the same time with possibly one exception, that of Dingwall's, showing no pessimism about likely developments and the future of parapsychology. All in all new ways of approach and particularly new ways of looking at our own field seem to have given us many hopes and some expectations.

I shall now do what will be little more than refresh your memories about what has been going on. My short accounts of the papers that have been presented, and some particularly relevant points of the discussions will not possibly go without the accompaniment of my own reactions and observations, gentle and pianissimo as I will try to keep them. We know by now only too well that absolute objectivity is a myth also in natural and physical sciences.

I will start with the more theoretical papers. On the first day of our conference you heard Professor Hansel aptly reminding us that one should not introduce the hypothesis of new entities before having ascertained whether or not a phenomenon can actually be explained according to known processes or mechanisms. In his imaginary retrospective survey of parapsychology as of the year 4000, he made many just remarks and criticisms. He gave us several useful suggestions about ways of improving our methods, not only in his paper, but also in subsequent discussions. His final words were, nevertheless, truly encouraging. "Psychology," he said, "has hardly touched the fringe of certain forms of complex human experience and behavior. Investigations in parapsychology could fill this gap and have a great deal to contribute to knowledge."

In Professor Mundle's paper, it seems to me, a justified criticism was made of Hansel's and other authors' assumptions that ESP could be, so to speak, a concrete explanatory model of particular events rather than the acquisition of information about or responding appropriately to external objects or events by means which are not yet understood. Mundle has given us some very good examples of undue reification of ESP taken from the writings of G. Price, Spencer Brown and others. He has made a stringent refutation of their attacks, and in the final part of his paper he has endorsed the recent experiment of Schmidt as meeting all the conditions which have been required by Hansel and by other authorities. In some subsequent discussion, hope has been expressed that the Schmidt experiments could be repeated by other investigators and that his results might be confirmed.

Of Dingwall's paper, I have already said, when it was discussed, that although it was difficult to agree with his generalizations, it was certainly a strong pull of the reins for all the parapsychological horses and a stern warning from a man of enormous experience. I should like here to point out one very important aspect of his position. Dingwall does

not seem to have the slightest doubt about his positivistic philosophy, his hard-boiled rationalism and his "two-and-two make four" viewpoint. Now this is exactly what has been put under scrutiny and largely disproved in modern thinking and looked at as something which could indeed take us into a blind alley.

John Cutten touched on his paper when he pointed out that the different, and sometimes stubborn, orientations of the investigator could create great difficulties in his own and in other people's investigations. Cutten's paper was particularly full of suggestions, practical proposals and encouraging views, in spite of the fact that he too, like others, could not deny that revising the past and the recent history of parapsychology, we are faced by a disappointing particular "decline effect." I shall come back to this point a little later.

The major alternatives to the rationalistic viewpoint "à la Dingwall" have been underlined by Sir Alister Hardy and by Rabbi Herbert Weiner, respectively, in their papers. Sir Alister, after a series of observations and quotations, all leading to a probable evaluation of the importance of religious experience for man, has affirmed that, in his opinion, the study and verification of some parapsychological phenomena—for instance telepathy—can give strong support to a consideration of man as an essentially religious being. He might have gone further and have said that a religious approach could probably help us to evaluate and to understand the parapsychological "dimension" as well as the empirical experimental approach. This, if I'm not mistaken, is the gist of what Rabbi Weiner tried to convey in his penetrating address when he said that there was something truly mystical, in spite of all, in the new "wave" of the young and in our time generally, and that this mystical "wave" could be utilized according to the teachings of the Kabbalah if it was harnessed and utilized for good and constructive purposes. Indirectly commenting on Dingwall's ideological position, he reminded us that "along with rationalism, we always had manifestations of tremendous subterranean unconscious forces" that, contrary to what Dingwall seems to think, "can never be extirpated by a rigidly rationalistic attitude." The possibility of making the two opposites combine, of achieving sheep and goats complementarity was, he said, very much akin to the position of parapsychology as represented by the revolutionary, enterprising, but at the same time wise and considered policy of the Parapsychology Foundation. It is to be hoped that Rabbi Weiner will let us know more, sooner or later, about the actual consideration and theorization of paranormal occurrences in the Jewish mystical tradition and particularly in the writings of the foremost Kabbalistic sages.

Mr. William Roll is certainly not a sponsor of mysticism. However, I

take it that it is not by chance that for many years (as he informed us) he has worked on the question of survival at the Psychical Research Foundation. It has appeared very clearly to us all that the very concept of survival (survival of what? in what conditions? in what milieu?, etc.) has been put under new and close scrutiny by Roll and by his collaborators, and that a very long distance has been covered from the days when spiritualists adhered to the so-called "survival hypotheses" without having analyzed the expression in the least and not knowing what they were talking about. We have all appreciated the caution which Mr. Roll has shown in evaluating the alleged reincarnation cases assembled and studied by Ian Stevenson, as well as his own experiments and those which are in progress at P.R.F.

The paper presented by Dr. West discussed sharply a point that was already mentioned: that parapsychological phenomena have shown a tendency to fade away in the course of persistent investigations. With his usual fairness and competence West mentioned several devices that have been designed to overcome this major negative factor. All, he told us, have been in vain. Why is that so? My impression is that not everything has been said about this major issue in our Conference. Some participants such as Weiner and Hillman have insisted that perhaps this is due to an intrinsic defect in our usual approach; that is, that we start from the assumption that we can study parapsychological phenomena as if they were ordinary occurrences of the physical or of the chemical world. With this general thesis I am inclined to agree, but as a psychologist and a psychoanalyst, I cannot ignore the mechanisms of repression, denial, etc., which we almost inevitably use vis-à-vis something that consciously we seem willing to admit but against which we have deepseated unconscious resistances.

Works by brilliant parapsychologists like Eisenbud and LeShan, not to mention some of my own writings, have described the aforesaid mechanisms; and Eisenbud went so far as to state that there was a permanent historical conditioning and reshaping of the phenomena which made it impossible for the phenomena themselves to be once and forever truly objectified in a given historical setting. I would add to this that in my opinion it is not by chance that in the beginning of our century we had the great phenomenon of gifted mediums with, however, what we now think were below standard criteria of evaluation; whereas nowadays we have along with many "mini" things a range of mini phenomena that are in addition elusive and difficult to catch like, as somebody has said in this conference, a mischievous elf or a will-o'-the-wisp.

Mr. Ely's neat presentation of communication theory and communication models was a sort of catalyzer and provoked a pleasant deluge of

comments, proposals and constructive discussion. After giving us an up-to-date account of a theoretical sort, Mr. Ely told us that in his opinion "the very foundation of parapsychology must rest on a communication base." He applied the engineering communication model to telepathy; the psychological model to precognition; the sociological model to presumptive communication with the dead. In the discussion that followed, some participants pointed out that in some cases, for instance clairvoyance, the communication model did not seem to correspond to the experimental setting, while others contended that in a more general way the "sender and receiver" model was not the only possible one, and that other models—synchronistic, loving fusion, etc.—could be conceived. More observations were made about the particular psychological conditions of so-called "transmitters" and "receivers," and how such conditions usually were when parapsychological communications seemed to occur.

Dr. Hillman's main contention was that parapsychology, as such, is activated by deep-seated fantasies, just as it happens with many so-called human problems. He presented them in the following classes: (1) work; (2) will; (3) intimacy; (4) the soul; (5) love or Eros; (6) upward drive (as when we speak of a "higher" world); (7) survival; and (8) spirit against matter. He reminded us that according to Jung the "upward-downward" function of the psyche—the other two being "conscious versus unconscious" and "introversion versus extraversion"—is of particular importance for our subject. I, for one, would quite agree with his conclusions, that is those concerning the irreducibility of the spirit so that "no method will ever capture it, organize it or lay it flat in explanation." The only remark I may make about this thoughtful, fruitful and rich presentation is that the fantasies considered by Hillman as typical activating forces in parapsychology are so fundamental that they are bound to activate many other problems apart from those of parapsychology. But this, however, could also be considered a favorable point for a more generalized concept of parapsychological factors as necessary elements in many human experiences.

Mr. Daniel Cohen gave us a brilliant but devastating description of what is done, mainly in the United States but I assure you also in my own country, in the realm of delivering and receiving mass information about parapsychology. His conclusions could only be pessimistic and they were so. However, when we see what goes on with the so-called averagely educated people as far as parapsychology is concerned, what could one expect from the masses or from those who give the masses what they actually seem to want?

I will now briefly recall the papers that I have tentatively put under the caption of "Facts and Experiments." First among them is the report

of Greenbank and Greenbank about paranormal occurrences in the medical and/or psychotherapeutic situations. As I pointed out in the discussion, similar situations sometimes provide extraordinary opportunities to verify, in addition to the parapsychological nature and value of the phenomena, the subtle agencies (interpersonal relationships, etc.), which often appear to have made them possible. I do hope that Dr. and Mrs. Greenbank will both go on working in this fascinating and often rewarding field.

Dr. Pahnke's paper, "The Use of Psychedelic Drugs in Parapsychological Research" was clear, accurate and informative as the author's papers usually are. Apart from his excellent historical survey, I think we all appreciated the design of his own experiments and made, along with him, some reflections about the fact that once again those drugs, wonderful and promising as they are in different fields, have so far failed to give us substantial help in our parapsychological endeavors. I wish Dr. Pahnke better success in his future experiments, but I cannot help asking myself and him if we are not cultivating wrong hopes and if the psychedelic drugs could not be used with different aims having perhaps also possible indirect parapsychological implications.

In Miss Kanthamani's paper we have all particularly appreciated the non-committed manner of her references to the parapsychological wonders of Indian tradition, and the clear-cut, up-to-date attitude she has as a full-fledged parapsychologist of our times. It seems to me, however, that when all is said and done, she is by no means sure that the "scientific," rationalistic approach to our subject matter is the only one we should approve of and rigidly adopt. I think that when she said that according to a famous Indian sage, Sri Aurobindo, one had to be a yogi first and then a parapsychologist, she was not paying superficial lip-service to a prominent representative of what we know to be a very deep-rooted, ancient Oriental wisdom.

I confess I found myself not very much at ease in Mr. Herbert's multidimensional work. However, I was intrigued and stimulated by many of his points and struck by the ingenuity of his technical devices. My only *de maxima* objection to his brilliant endeavors would be of a philosophical sort; mainly, that I cannot but stick to the principle whereby one cannot conceive of anything independently of a mind that thinks of it. This, it seems to me, is a theoretical obstacle to all attempts to dispose of the human element and to describe, to use Herbert's words, "psychic-less" occurrences.

At this point I am reminded of what Mr. Angoff said at the beginning when he quoted William James and made us face a basic question—is it by any chance the destiny of parapsychological phenomena to be eternally subject to recurring doubts and affirmations? As I see it, this

is quite possibly the case. Assuming that the margin of psi phenomena that can be produced and/or accepted by human beings is an inverse function of man's technological progress, of his need to be rational, of his flight from inner realities and fear of his own inner world, modern man's attitude vis-à-vis psi occurrences would certainly be one of unrecognized contradictions.

On one hand, he may lean toward substitutes for *real* contact with the dark inner side of his psyche and show an interest, superficial and actually non-committing, in the world of palmistry, popular astrology, cheap magic, and all sorts of superstitions. On the other side, he may pretend in good faith to have a strong wish to scrutinize his inner depths, including psi events, and to this purpose use all the possibilities that modern rational thinking and technology offer him. What would really occur but a great amount of self-deception, methodological snares, make-believe, etc., all favoring and favored by unconscious resistances, repression and actual opposition to psi occurrences? In fact, we would have a flight from man's inner world, and from the psi level of psychological events, a "fading out," as it has been called, of the phenomena. At this point man would show great surprise and/or displeasure about the fact that in spite of all his good intentions and efforts the psi dimension he has earnestly tried to capture, ever and ever gets away from his grasp.

Yes, perhaps this is our destiny: to have a constant awareness of a fourth dimension in ourselves and never be able to finally trap it into the cage of our human existence. But even if it were so, we should not complain. Our Faustian trying and trying again is preferable to imagining that we have reached our ultimate goal, and so to rest upon non-existing laurels. We are fellow travelers in a fascinating boat, splendidly arranged for us by benevolent souls. Therefore, let's go on in our adventurous navigation and say, with the French poet, that like the mythical Ulysses, we are satisfied with our particular strange fate. Happy is the man who, like Ulysses, has had a beautiful journey.