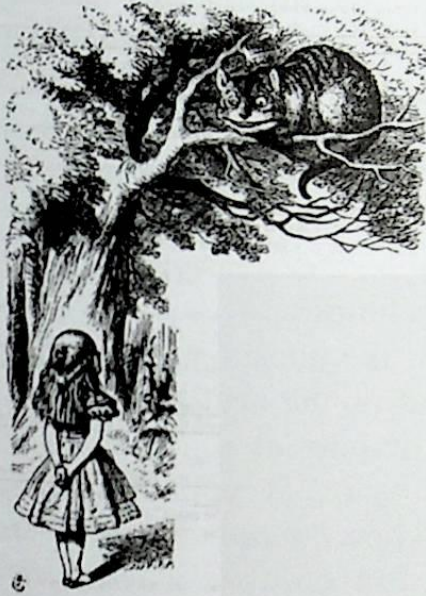


ESCAPE FROM WONDERLAND¹

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ALICE: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

CHESHIRE CAT: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

(L. Carroll, 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)

Introduction

Alice is seeking re-orientation as she encounters the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland. In more than one respect, the field of parapsychology as a

¹ The following ruminations were basically written on the day before the Parapsychology Foundation Conference in Utrecht commenced. They have profited from the fact that, as a member of the Advisory Committee, I had the privilege of seeing the full manuscripts of all presentations (except one) a couple of weeks before the conference. However, unlike the recapturing (and captivating) personal reflections Chris Roe presented in his 'moderator's summation' in the final conference session, mine were not intended to distill or reflect upon the essence of the individual contributions. Rather, they were meant to remind participants of the general conference rationale and to provide some suggestions, starting points and, maybe, ammunition for the concluding general discussion. The chapter to follow here is an edited, semi-formalized version of that presentation. While I have filled in some gaps, expanded a few sections and turned it into a coherent, legible text, I have tried to keep it suitably brief and to preserve its original character as an incitement for the final discussion period.

whole and the distinguished participants in this meeting arguably find themselves in a situation that is not dissimilar to Alice's.² The general theme of the present conference, "Charting the Future of Parapsychology", is to ask where parapsychology ought to go from where it currently is. This requires that we ascertain — and reach some mutual agreement about — where in fact we are. And it also requires that we come to a general decision on where we actually want to get to. Our task therefore has been both diagnostic and prospective. We have been trying to identify, with at least some degree of confidence, the place that we have reached after all those years of wanderings; we have been trying to define possible goals for parapsychology's future; and we have been pondering recommendable and reasonably slip-proof ways of reaching those goals for parapsychology.

It is important to realize, though, that the questions about the goals or the aims we want to pursue, or about or the destination we would like to get to, themselves are *not* scientific ones at all (Kemeny, 1959). Rather, they are philosophical questions, or, if you like, ones that reflect our intellectual preferences. Science *cannot* tell us where we ought to go. This is for us to decide. But once we have made that decision, once we are sure about our goals, science is the best way to go — *methódos* being the Greek word for "way" (towards an end). In fact, it is the only way to go as long as we have not given up on the science game.

Three Traditional Attitudes

Traditionally, there has been a great variety of attitudes, both inside and outside the field, on the question as to what aims parapsychology ought to pursue. I would like to mention and illustrate three different perspectives that most of us will have frequently encountered inside the field of parapsychology. I will briefly discuss them in turn.

² Equating the field of parapsychology with Lewis Carroll's (1865) 'Wonderland' of course is not my invention. It has a veritable tradition (e.g., see French, 1975). It may be of some relevance to recognize that the creator of Alice, Lewis Carroll [i.e., Oxford mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson], was among the very early members of the Society for Psychical Research (Shaberman, 1972). He was convinced of the reality of thought-transference and psychokinesis, but remained skeptical towards survival issues (Cohen, 1979, vol. I, pp. 471-472).

Miracles for the Sake of Miracles

Some researchers apparently have satisfied themselves that paranormal phenomena ultimately cannot (or should not) be subjected to meaningful experimentation and theory building in traditional scientific terms. They are content to enjoy miracles for their own sake. A few years ago, Carlos Alvarado provided an apt characterization of that orientation, when he wrote:

Our field needs to learn something about the phenomena, not to continue sharing marvelous stories for their own sake. My impression over the years is that a segment of those concerned with the study of spontaneous phenomena are not interested in explaining or understanding the phenomena. They seem to be happy to maintain the mystery for its own sake. In their view, the phenomena are something sacred that should not be probed too much.... My impression is that some of those interested in survival of death or in conceptualizing psychic phenomena as manifestations that point toward nonphysical or spiritual aspects of human beings are generally not interested in showing how cases relate to aspects of the natural world. For some interested in these views, studying whether mediums have dissociative experiences in their daily lives, studying the psychological profile of out-of-body experiencers, or studying the relationship of personality variables to ESP experiences is irrelevant. These researchers feel it is more important to establish survival, spirituality, or the like because of the implications of these concepts for the nature of human beings. Perhaps those who see the study of spontaneous phenomena in this way do not want the topic associated with mundane physical, biological and psychological correlates because such correlates undermine the more spiritual views they prefer.

(Alvarado, 2002, pp. 117, 119)

Those who share the attitudes so eloquently described by Alvarado seem deeply stuck in Alice's Wonderland, presumably enjoying themselves. Connoisseurs of Alice will remember that the little girl, after leaving behind the slowly vanishing Cheshire Cat and its epistemological inquisitiveness, encounters the Hatter and the March Hare, one as mad as the other. Seeking 'miracles for the sake of miracles' basically is not a scientific attitude. Those who have adopted

it have entered a different intellectual game. Admittedly, this may be a legitimate turn in terms of personal orientation, and it may be fine for those who can appreciate a 'mad tea party' with the Hatter and the Hare. But it does not, and cannot, form part of science. Parapsychology as a scientific endeavor is all about "showing how cases relate to aspects of the natural world".

Disillusionment and Resignation

Those who, like this author, have been spending major parts of their intellectual lives and scientific careers in the exceedingly difficult and challenging field of parapsychological research and theory building, will almost certainly have experienced a few disappointments and disillusionments along the way. And we all have known various other once-committed scientists who started off with a great deal of enthusiasm and a couple of interesting ideas, but then were not seen or heard of anymore after it had become apparent that the phenomena in life and lab flatly refused to fit their respective favorite ideas.

Science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick of *Blade Runner* and *Ubik* fame, in an interview on an entirely unrelated topic, once provided what seems like a pertinent description of that feeling of disillusionment. He remarked:

Now how do you explain that? You're building a jigsaw puzzle, and you keep building it, and you have only one piece left, and you have one hole in the puzzle. You take the last piece and you start to put it in the last hole. And it doesn't fit. And since it doesn't fit, the whole puzzle is screwed up. You can never complete it. And while you're standing there looking at it, it just slowly falls into a million parts.

(Philip K. Dick, quoted in Williams, 1986, pp. 98-99)

I guess there are few among us who have not had that kind of experience once in a while. Some of those who have experienced such disillusionment evidently have turned their backs on Wonderland and its peculiar inhabitants, and they have devoted themselves to easier, more comfortable and obedient (and maybe more rewarding) tasks. Some of them may even have joined the ranks of those who prefer the 'miracles for the sake of miracles' approach.

Others apparently have become card-carrying skeptics instead. Thus, Susan Blackmore regrettably left the field of parapsychology

after much swaying to and fro (Blackmore, 1985) when the desired effects failed to turn up in her own experiments and those that were found in the experiments of her colleagues did not quite live up to what she expected them to be.

London mathematician John Taylor, on the other hand, mercifully dropped out when he had satisfied himself that his electromagnetic pet ideas,³ which his parapsychological peers had never taken very seriously anyway, could not be corroborated. It is highly instructive to compare Taylor's early trust in fairly transparent wonderworkers and his related EM enthusiasm (Taylor, 1975a, 1975b) with his final retreat only a few years later (Balanovski & Taylor, 1978; Taylor & Balanovski, 1979), which culminated in the conclusion:

...neither EM nor any other scientific theory can explain any of the above mentioned ESP phenomena. In particular there is no reason to support the common claim that there still may be some scientific explanation which has as yet been undiscovered. The successful reductionist approach of science rules out such a possibility [...]. We can only conclude that the existence of any of the psychic phenomena we have considered is very doubtful.

(Taylor & Balanoski, 1979, p. 633)

There are quite a few similar stories – some of them told, some not – in the not-so-distant history of parapsychology.

Leave Alice Behind

Let me briefly mention a third attitude⁴ – that of attempting to normalize the paranormal. Those who have chosen that approach are trying to identify, isolate, describe and explain seemingly wondrous phenomena and to present them to and discuss them with their scientific colleagues in related fields outside of Wonderland. My impression is that the vast majority of those who have addressed us during this conference and of those in the audience decidedly belong to this latter group that insists on having explanations according to the rules of science.

³ "...on theoretical grounds the only scientifically feasible explanation [of paranormal phenomena] could be electromagnetism (EM) involving suitably strong EM fields." (Taylor & Balanovski, 1979, p. 631)

⁴ The following is essentially adapted from Hövelmann & Krippner (1986) and Krippner & Hövelmann (2005).

However, this means that we ought to follow the phenomena and our experimental results and study the entire range of anomalies in consciousness wherever that may lead us, even if it may force us to adopt an increasing range of non-psi approaches and eventually bring us back into mainstream science. If we really are interested in scientific answers to the questions that have plagued most of us most of the time we will have to follow wherever our well-considered scientific methods will lead us. Otherwise, parapsychology might turn into an ever-shrinking field with ever-shrinking competence and relevance, and it eventually might lose its subject matter altogether once the other scientific disciplines have taken over and provided the non-psi (or maybe even the sort-of-psi) explanations we have been searching for all along.

So let us first get very serious about answering the Cheshire Cat's question of where we want to get to. Let us consider ways that hold out some promise that eventually they will get us there. And let us leave Alice to her fate (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2.

*Alice in the sea of tears—*from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Ch. 2

A Plea for Concerted Efforts

No doubt, previous attempts to present empirical findings of parapsychological research and related theoretical ideas to the scientific community at large have not been received with open arms, much less with open minds. And we cannot reasonably expect that our future approaches will be welcomed with any greater enthusiasm as long as our feet remain more or less firmly planted in Wonderland's soil. I may

remind you of the pessimistic perspective, for which no doubt there are at least some valid reasons, that was sketched out in Ed May's slightly grumbling contribution to this conference. But at the same time I may also remind you of the enthusiastic 'optimism' expressed by Roger Nelson. And, again, please remember York Dobyns' and Richard Shoup's well-argued cases that our findings may not be as incompatible with current physical knowledge as some would have us believe. Please also consider what Hoyt Edge and Etzel Cardeña have described, during this meeting, as opportunities for the 'naturalization of psi', as long as we manage to avoid conceptual vaguenesses and obfuscations.

Again, Carlos Alvarado in his historical talk during this meeting has reminded us of the fruitful attempt to install a couple of committees after the first Utrecht conference more than half a century ago that were to coordinate international research efforts in parapsychology. I venture to suggest that, as one way of charting the future of parapsychology, we adhere to that somewhat successful 1953 model and try and establish other committees or working groups this time that might develop some kind of *master plan* for a new and well-coordinated approach to the scientific community. Below are listed a few areas to which such committees or work groups might direct their attention. And I have added a few thoughts and suggestions that hopefully will lend some plausibility to the areas selected:

- Coordinate empirical research efforts in prominent areas, and set up an empirical register. The development of more testable theories, both conventional and innovative, is certainly needed.
- Encourage publication and re-scheduling of our professional journals. Currently, some of our long-standing periodicals are way behind their schedules. In some specific cases, this may be the fault of the respective journal editors or, rather, of the issuing organizations or societies. In others, probably the parapsychological community itself is to be blamed, because there is an apparent shortage of submitted quality papers, communications and reviews. If we are unable to produce material of sufficient interest to be discussed among ourselves in the parapsychological periodicals, how can we seriously expect the outside world to feel any inclination to take a closer look at our experimental data and the conclusions and theories that may be based on them?
- Coordinate related research and other activities. Thanks to the generous support of Het Johan Borgmanfonds Foundation that, in

May of 2007, sponsored the "1st International Expert Meeting on Clinical Parapsychology", well-coordinated efforts on an international basis in the field of clinical parapsychology and of counseling individuals with exceptional experiences have had a very promising new start. This will soon become more openly visible (Kramer, Bauer & Hövelmann, 2009) and, hopefully, have some long-term effects.

- Design and coordinate appropriate ways of presenting empirical findings and theoretical reflections both to the colleagues in the field and the scientific community at large. This may also include providing educational opportunities for interested colleagues in other fields.
- Rapprochement with establishment science may also profit from the sometimes neglected insight that parapsychological research is of value regardless of whether its outcome is supportive of 'paranormality'. Even in the extremely unlikely case that all experimental work in parapsychology could be accounted for by methodological errors, this would provide useful information that helps to re-design research in this and other areas.
- Also, including purely psychological or other non-psi components into some (or even many) of our psi experiments would lend additional legitimacy to our research. Even if we find no significant psi effects, we would nevertheless be likely to find psychological or other phenomena that merit our interest and that of the scientific community at large. The parapsychological literature would be all the richer for the inclusion of such results, and indeed scientists from other fields would be drawn to these results and delve into the parapsychological literature, whereas they would have had no apparent reason to do so if such results were not presented (for more details, see Thalbourne & Hövelmann, in preparation).
- The need for conceptual clarity has long been recognized in the parapsychological literature (Hövelmann, 1983). But, in fact, little has been done in coordinated ways to prevent conceptual vagueness, semantic confusion, and the misappropriation of terms. Various concepts such as "altered states" (Cardeña, in this volume), "psi-conducive states" (Hövelmann, 1988), and others are not properly defined and their meaning is not remotely as clear as their ubiquitous usage seems to suggest.

- Some colleagues recently (e.g., Moddel, 2008) and not so recently (e.g., Broughton, 1988) have insisted that application issues might eventually decide the future of parapsychology as an organized scientific endeavor. As Garret Moddel (2008, p. 2) observed: "We need psi applications — preferably some that make some money — and then everyone will take notice". In a sense, clinical parapsychology, mentioned before, can be considered a field of applied parapsychological expertise. Clinical parapsychology, however, is concerned more with psychological (and maybe social) improvements than with economic profit. Application-oriented workshops and other projects may prove to be useful in the long run.

No doubt, many of you will have additional suggestions for concerted actions that might help to chart the future of parapsychology, and we all are eager to hear about them.

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