

PARANORMAL AND PRETERNATURAL

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By paranormal, I mean to indicate the various types of phenomena which make up the subject of parapsychology; it is superfluous to list them, however, in the traditional division of intellectual and psychic phenomena. By preternatural, I mean those manifestations which, though they can be verified in man or even only involve man or his ambience, must be able to be traced back in their causality to forces superior to him.

We already know something about these forces which are superior to man because of the certainty of the religious faith which is professed by a large part of humanity. I have used the word "certainty" since faith rests on a mental process, on a reasoning power which fully justifies credibility.

Now, among the truths of faith, there is that of the existence of the angels, created by God as purely spiritual beings, therefore superior to us, beings in whom the spirit is linked to and influenced in its activity by matter. They, too, were subjected to a test, many rebelled and from that moment one speaks of "good" angels and "bad" angels or, better yet, of angels and devils.

I can list among the superior beings the dead, who, now separated from the material part, are able to do what man, at least in his normal condition, cannot do. Among the souls of the dead can then be considered, as a category by themselves, the souls of the non-baptized. It is still quite possible, finally, even if not very probable, to consider the existence of other beings; an existence, the negation of which cannot be seriously argued.

In one category of the field of preternatural manifestations, can be considered those in which there is a suspicion of a demonic intervention; thus, we have local infestation, personal infestation, diabolic possession. In another category can be listed the manifestations relating to the intervention of angels or of those who are already living in the glory of God or are on the purgative way which leads to that glory and happiness; for example, we can recall apparitions, visions, ecstasies, charismatic powers in their most varied meanings.

If one considers, then, that with regard to the spirits of the dead a demonstration of their intervention is not possible, everything comes down, in the present state of things, to the eventual activity of the angels or of the demons. In fact, because of their superiority, these beings can take the place of others in the full activity of the spirits of the dead, for which the affirmation of the presence of these latter, in those happenings which could be liable to suspicion, is not and can never be demonstrated; and in this precise point, among others, is the weakest aspect of spiritism, which can never be proved because of the absolute lack of spiritistic identification.¹

The preternatural does not fall within the sphere of the miraculous. A miracle, in fact, is an event which goes above and beyond all the forces of nature, a fact which is outside the order of created nature and, therefore, it is impossible that it can be comprised within the limits of that order in which, precisely, are angels and demons.²

A miracle, therefore, is the work of God; however, God is not hindered in his use of anything, nor of any other creature, not even the devil, even if, considering the apologetic character of a miracle, the demon does not seem the best adapted instrument.

If one considers then that the angels, in what concerns their power in confrontation with the world and with persons, do not act except by the command of God and such instruments of his power as he chooses, their action enters, in fact, into the field of the miraculous, that is, supernatural. In the concept of preternatural, then, only the action of the demon remains.³

The phenomena which can be verified in the situations which relate to the preternatural are, on the whole, those same ones which are part of the study of parapsychology. Therefore, faced with manifestations of that type, the hypothesis of explanation must be considered natural, the presumption is in favor of naturality.

In fact, a principle common and evident is that one should not have recourse to preternatural forces when there is a probability, even if minimal, of a natural explanation. In other words, we cannot affirm the intervention of superior forces if the impossibility of a natural explanation is not first demonstrated. If we consider that natural explanation has long been held to be the solution for all scientific research in parapsychology, a preternatural explanation, to be affirmed, must be seriously demonstrated on a case-by-case basis. Never, therefore, must the preternatural explanation be considered as a hypothesis or, still worse, as a normal theory of parapsychological phenomena.

Precisely because of the similarity between the phenomenology of the paranormal and the preternatural, a demonstration of the latter can be developed only by taking into consideration the modality of the

exteriorization of the phenomena, that is, the rules that condition the manifestations and repetitions, modes and rules that only scientific development can discover and formulate. And it is, actually, the presence of the form and rules that only scientific development can discover and formulate. And it is, actually, the presence of the form and rules different or even opposite to the scientific discovery and formulation, which brings a conclusion with certainty to the preternatural origin of the phenomena.

If, in fact, these modes and rules come from science, proposed as conditions sufficient and indispensable for the natural actuation of the phenomena, if they do not exist, it is obvious and logical to conclude that the origin is not natural, but preternatural. These phenomena will have been, that is, caused by beings superior to man and to his world and so not linked to its laws and scientific forms.

From what has been said, it is easy to see that for the demonstration of the preternatural we must have (is extremely useful, even indispensable) a scientific construction of parapsychology. Only parapsychology, in fact, can furnish the instrument adapted for an argument of that type.

In the past, when, in the area of the paranormal, it was not even suspected that there could be a possible natural explanation, such phenomena were held to be preternatural in themselves. A confirmation of this position was spiritism. In fact, it was men of science themselves who, in the beginning, in order to explain the phenomena, resorted to the intervention of the spirits of the "discarnate," while theologians, planted firmly in the preternatural camp, accepted and defended by the scientists themselves, proposed as a solution—undoubtedly wiser and more reasonable, if not true—the devil; spiritism and demonism, neither of which were beneficial and seemly for science nor church.

Fortunately, in various situations, together with paranormal phenomena one can see as well phenomena of a psychiatric order. This can be verified in a most striking way in the so-called "diabolic possession" in so far as it concerns the demonic field; in the visions, apparitions and some other manifestations in so far as it concerns asceticism.

With regard to the subject of diabolic possession, I had the occasion and the honor to give a talk at the conference of this illustrious and meritorious Parapsychology Foundation held in the summer of 1965, at the Foundation's then European Regional Headquarters in St. Paul de Vence, France.

An episode of the suspected possession, for which there had been eye-witnesses in 1949-1950, enabled me to see the scientific void in one criterion which, based on the presence of some phenomena, was no longer valid, especially for the birth of parapsychology as a science.

After long studies in the field of theology, psychiatry and parapsychology, I proposed for the first time in the work, *Gli Indemoniati (The Possessed, Rome 1959)*, a new diagnostic criterion based, not on the presence of determined phenomena, but on the modes in which the phenomena present themselves. In its formulation, it will, therefore, remain always valid and will not be disproved by scientific progress, but rather will facilitate the application of such.

That criterion can be extended to the whole field of the preternatural. In the situations in which—as is amply verified in diabolic possession—with the paranormal phenomenology there is also a psychiatric phenomenology, the criterion, besides rendering immediately a very selective function with regard to the many cases which have nothing to do with the preternatural, acquires a more complete and sure application from the moment that, for the phenomenology of a psychiatric type, the scientific methods are very clear and precise.

However, with regard to that which concerns paranormal phenomenology, though, unfortunately, we have not yet come to a more profound scientific formulation, there have appeared some characteristics which are most significant for the orientation of the preternatural, such as the amplitude and multiplicity of the phenomena.⁴

I would like, at this point, to present to the scientists and, in particular, with regard to the theme which I have been developing, to the psychiatrists and parapsychologists, a recommendation, if I may: do not be too exclusivistic and a prioristic, but open to every possible eventuality.

The presence in different individuals of phenomena that are similar does not authorize us to conclude that the cause is the same, especially if these should happen with rules and forms which are diverse.

It would be simplistic to always affirm the preternatural (a position which, in fact, does not happen with the theologian) though it would not be unreasonable, given that the angels and the demons or other superior forces can do what man can do. To deny systematically, however, and integrally the preternatural, as can be verified today, though ever more rarely, would signify falling into the absurd position of attributing to human nature powers which are above its possibility, a childish and illogical position, motivated solely by an a prioristic skepticism with regard to the supernatural.

And yet, some scholars hold to such an idea with striking superficiality. I would like to give here an example, even though it happened some time ago. It is about an episode of possession ("The Possessed of Cochin China", 1733) which I published in my book *The Possessed*, taken from a work of Calmeil⁵ who, in his time, came to know of a letter which a missionary, Father Delacourt, had written on November 25, 1738, to his friend, Doctor Winslow. Among the phenomena of

xenoglossia, of occult knowledge, etc., there is the case of levitation which I quote from the text: "I thought, in an exorcism," writes Father Delacourt, "to command the demon, in Latin, to carry the patient to the ceiling of the church, with his feet up and his head down. Immediately, the body of the man became rigid and, as if totally powerless, it was dragged from the center of the church to a column, and there, with the feet tied together and the body stuck to the column, without any help from the hands, it was transported like a flash to the ceiling, like a heavy weight lifted up high at great speed. . . . It stayed up there more than a half-hour, and as I was afraid to leave him there any longer, in as much as I was frightened by what I had seen, I ordered the demon to bring the man back to me and deposit him at my feet without harming him in any way. . . . And, immediately, the body was given back to me like a bundle of dirty wash."

Calmeil could have overlooked that episode or been dubious about its authenticity, but he accepted it as stated and this is his comment: "We must be grateful to Father Delacourt for not having kept quiet about this impressive fact of possession, since the missionary has described, without being required to, the phenomena of religious monomania, and it is today clear to all that he had exorcised a person affected by delirium." A very brief and surprising judgment from one who was deliberately hostile to the preternatural. I have never, in all the manuals I have examined, seen paranormal phenomena enumerated in the symptoms of psychic illness.

In conclusion, I would like to underline how parapsychology seems to be the science, that, more than any other, interests theology. It is, in fact, as it appears in this paper, an indispensable instrument and the most fit in the diagnosis of the preternatural.

Therefore, the theologians must formulate, sincerely and happily, the best promises for the progress of parapsychology along its very difficult scientific road; in fact, it serves theologians to be always more able to find—among the numerous cases that are not at all preternatural—the very, very exceptional and extremely rare episodes of preternatural interventions, certainly possible and sometimes existing.

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3. For an in-depth study of such a concept in the classic Thomistic distinction of miracles of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd categories, see C. Balducci, *Gli Indemoniati*, Rome 1959, pp. 20–24.
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6. Calmeil, L. F. *De la folie considerée sous le point de vue pathologique, philosophique, historique et judiciaire*, Paris, 1845, Vol. II, pp. 418–424.