

Wild Beasts of the Philosophical Desert

Wild Beasts of the Philosophical Desert:
Philosophers on Telepathy
and Other Exceptional Experiences

By

Hein van Dongen, Hans Gerding
and Rico Sneller

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P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

STANLEY KRIPPNER

An “anomalous phenomenon” is one that is rare, not well understood, or both. Mainstream science has not been open to these phenomena, claiming that they undermine the foundations of what is known about time, space, and energy. Philosophers, on the other hand, have been somewhat less dismissive. Indeed, some of them wrote extensively on such topics as telepathy, visions, and spiritual ecstasy. This remarkable book is somewhat of an anomaly. The impact of unusual experiences on the life and thoughts of well-known philosophers has rarely been reported in such detail and with such insight.

For example, readers who thought they were familiar with the work of Kant may be surprised to know of his keen interest in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. This Swedish mystic claimed to be in contact with spirits and angels. They were a vital part of his mystical experiences. But Swedenborg also had a vision in which he claimed to be present at a fire raging through Stockholm, a fire that actually occurred and stopped very near to Swedenborg’s house. In other words, the fire was a verifiable event as opposed to an unverifiable experience of heavenly beings.

The difference between “events” and “experiences” has been pointed out by such ancient philosophers as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. The former wrote, “It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that is important.” Marcus Aurelius observed that events might shape one’s life but the meaning attached to those events is even more influential.

Mainstream science can tolerate experiential reports, even those that qualify as “exceptional human experiences.” However, once investigators provide evidence that the experience was linked to a verifiable event, most contemporary scientists react with dismissal at best and hostility at worst. Kant originally accepted Swedenborg’s vision of the Stockholm fire as veridical but later declared it to be impossible. More recently, more than one scientist has proclaimed, “Even if clairvoyance (or precognition, reincarnation, or other anomalies) were demonstrated to be true, I still would not believe in it.”

Schelling, on the other hand, maintained and even expanded on his proposal that nature and spirit form a continuum. His model places spiritual processes within material reality rather than external to it. This point of view resembles that taken by some recent writers who have suggested that the cosmos created itself and that a process of “self-organization” displays material nature and spiritual essence working in tandem.

A different type of self-organization was proposed by Schopenhauer who postulated a “dream organ” that was responsible for both night-time dreams and daytime visions, one that was activated by “animal magnetism.” These terms seem quaint by today’s standards and have morphed into brain centres, in the case of the “dream organ,” and suggestibility, in the case of “animal magnetism.” But tribal shamans would feel comfortable with Schopenhauer’s terms; dreams are so important in most indigenous societies that they are often seen as a “separate reality,” one that is just as concrete as everyday reality, if not more so. Further, they often heal the sick with rituals that employ “energies” that resemble the “magnetism” espoused by many acolytes of Franz Anton Mesmer whose “mesmerism” eventually became “hypnosis.”

America’s first major psychologist, William James, was also a philosopher, an identity that was looked down upon by his successors who ascribed to behaviourism. But James not only wrote about anomalies, he sought them out. He attended séances, ingested nitrous oxide, observed faith healers at work, and saw people with dissociative identity disorders “switch” from one personality to another. His work is often seen as the forerunner of “parapsychology,” the disciplined study of those anomalies that seem to transcend mainstream science’s understanding of spatial, temporal, and energetic constructs. Although a down-to-earth “pragmatist,” James investigated many of the celebrated claimant mediums of his day – “claimant” because they claimed to be in contact with the dead.

Bergson is also cited by 21st century parapsychologists; he handled the vaunted “mind/brain problem” by stating that all the brain was in the mind but not all the mind was in the brain. The brain’s filtering function was expounded upon by the 20th century essayist and novelist Aldous Huxley whose *Life* magazine article about parapsychology brought the field to the attention of millions of mid-century readers. Huxley used the parapsychological term “psi” to refer to phenomena that are wildly anomalous, those phenomena that he considered events as well as experiences. Huxley’s prophetic “brave new world” (the title of one of his novels) was glimpsed by Bergson who warned that humankind might

destroy itself if it disregarded what occurs outside of its ordinary filters, a world very much at odds with materialism and consumerism.

Driesch was a biologist as well as a philosopher. He used the term “entelechy” to refer to a living organism’s movement toward wholeness, and the self-healing and self-direction that result from this movement. Driesch used “entelechy” as the basis for his concept of parapsychology, stressing its biological aspects. Many current parapsychologists suspect that the future explanation of “psi” will come from biology rather than from quantum physics, the often-proclaimed key to psychic anomalies. Indeed, there are a host of supportive biological experiments demonstrating that if a group of cells is poisoned by toxic material, a group of similar cells will also fall sick, even though there is no physical connection between them. The hypothetical “morphogenic fields” are said to connect a species in ways so that when one member or group “learns” something new, that same new skill can be picked-up by other members of that same species, even at considerable distances. This hypothesis was first proposed by Hernani Andrade, a Brazilian engineer, who called it the “biological organizing principle,” and like the English biologist Rupert Sheldrake, saw it as the nexus for “psi” in all of its forms.

Marcel’s experiences as a Red Cross officer in the First World War provided the basis for his development of existential philosophy. But they also stimulated his interest in parapsychology because of his success in locating missing soldiers. Existentialists typically focus on “existence” rather than “essence,” and one could make the logical leap that psychic experiences should be taken more seriously than the “essential” understandings of nature from which they depart. Rollo May, who was instrumental in bringing existential psychology and psychotherapy to the United States, was interested in parapsychology and had no problem in accepting laboratory evidence of “psi.” May often made keen observations about the parapsychological work that I had done during my career; as colleagues at Saybrook University, we allowed students to write essays and even dissertations on parapsychological topics.

Many readers will be surprised to find Derrida in this collection of philosophers. However, many of his remarks on “synchronicities” and other exceptional human experiences indicate that he gave this topic considerable thought. An icon of “post-modern philosophy,” Derrida constantly questioned authority and tradition. He placed telepathy directly in the centre of his understanding of consciousness, often referring to Freud’s writings on telepathic dreams. Derrida went out of his way to show that experiences differed from “objective” events, but gave more importance to them than most current-day parapsychologists.

The study of consciousness went into eclipse, mainly in the United States, when William James left the scene. However, each of these philosophers is concerned with this topic, one which can be defined as the pattern of an organism's thoughts, feelings, and intentions, either from moment to moment or over time, whether in or out of awareness. This book clearly demonstrates the contributions that philosophers can make to the study of consciousness. Even such staunch materialists as Daniel Dennett are regular contributors to journals and conferences featuring consciousness studies. The writers featured in this volume present a mosaic, one that is not always congruent but, nevertheless, intriguing, provocative, and entertaining. One of the missions of philosophy, whether ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, spiritual or secular, has been to raise questions about "reality." Scientists see this as their mission as well, but philosophers have a freer rein, one that can encompass the humanities as well as technology, one that can speculate rather than form hypotheses, and one that can probe the depths and the heights of cosmic mysteries.

There are wild beasts in philosophical terrains. The authors of this book would not think of taming or capturing them, but of learning from them and appreciating the wonder of their wildness.

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INTRODUCTION

Telepathy, apparitions, psychic healing, hypnosis, the afterlife: in society, there is a lot of interest in such phenomena. However, in science and philosophy, we find them investigated only on a small scale. Still, there are several philosophers who wrote about them. This book attempts to shed some light on a number of well-known thinkers' views on phenomena that are currently labelled as *exceptional human experiences*.

Nowadays, people often use the term “paranormal”. This term, which is now more than 80 years old, was probably coined by one of the philosophers to be discussed in this book: Hans Driesch (1867-1941). Driesch refers to research in “paranormal” phenomena as evidence against materialism. He claimed that in due time research of these phenomena would be at the centre of science. A science with an eye for life and consciousness would replace the present materialistic standards.

Taking a closer look at the history of research in telepathy and related matters, it becomes clear how the idea of phenomena apparently “in conflict with our current knowledge” only gradually became visible – proportional to Western science’s mechanistic turn. Although never fully accepted by science, through time these phenomena have always generated curiosity. The philosophies of Kant, Schelling, Schopenhauer, James, Bergson, Driesch, Marcel and Derrida were more or less influenced by their cognizance of phenomena like telepathy. Their publications on these subjects, however, are not widely known.

A Glimpse on History

One finds most of the interest in extraordinary human experiences (trance, contemplation, ecstasy, magic, theurgy, out-of-body experiences, near death experiences, etcetera) in the Neoplatonic and Hermetic traditions. Although the term “telepathy” itself was not used until the nineteenth century, the concept of thought transmission already seemed to occur in antiquity. Up until modern times, it was explained by the ancient idea of *sympathy*: the assumption of an invisible bond between all living beings. Aristotle mentions people dreaming about events occurring at the same time in different places. He suggests coincidence as an explanation,

proposing at the same time the hypothesis that the thoughts of people are somehow able to travel through air.

Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), a Renaissance author and occultist in the Neoplatonic tradition, writes about his tests with thought transmission. He assures us that, with the proper preparation, this should happen within 24 hours. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) is probably the first thinker to suggest that research should be done to find out to what extent alleged thought transmission can be verified. In his “natural history”, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Bacon proposes to simply count the hits and misses. However, it would take centuries for experimental and statistical research in the (human) sciences to actually take place. At the beginning of the twentieth century the first statistical tests on telepathy were conducted by Charles Richet in France, Gerard Heymans in the Netherlands and Joseph Banks Rhine in the USA.

Throughout the centuries developments in intellectual culture have influenced the way people dealt with experiences like telepathy. The eighteenth century produced both the influential seer Swedenborg’s unusual views on the afterlife, and Franz Anton Mesmer’s “animal magnetism”. Philosophers did not fail to notice these ideas. Swedenborg’s extraordinary claims greatly inspired Immanuel Kant’s famous investigations on the limits of human knowledge. Arthur Schopenhauer was impressed by the research done in the field of animal magnetism, which he interpreted as a “practical metaphysics”.

The nineteenth century gave rise to a world-wide spiritualistic movement. Claims by spiritualists about the possibility of thought transmission between humans and spirits led in 1882 to the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), a society that had as its goal the scientific investigation of these far-reaching claims. Its research considered the possibility that thought transmission occurs between living human beings, rather than between humans and spirits. Researchers like William James worked with large-scale questionnaires. Among the phenomena most frequently reported were apparitions of people who clearly seemed to be in distress. In many cases it turned out that the person in question, at that particular moment in time, although far away “in the real world”, was actually in trouble. Accordingly, the term “telepathy” was born (coined by F.W.H Myers).

A number of well-known philosophers were presidents and members of the SPR, and did research for this Society. Aside from James, Bergson and Driesch, whom we will discuss later in this book, there were other philosophers, like the utilitarian moral philosopher Henry Sidgwick¹,

Edmund Gurney, a pioneer in the field of the philosophy of music² and the analytic philosophers C.D. Broad³ and H.H. Price.⁴

Many psychologists were active in the area of psychical research. Among them were Richet, Janet, Freud, and Jung. Jacques Derrida would also later consider the psychoanalytic approach of telepathy.

Research and Perspectives

To be able to follow the thoughts of the philosophers discussed in this book, the reader does not need to be completely informed about the current state of affairs in this area of research. Obviously, the philosophers we write about were only familiar with the research results and the corresponding expectations of their own time.

When referring to research in telepathy and related issues, most languages use the term “parapsychology”. This type of research is subject to the same criteria of any other experimental and statistical form of research. The data of parapsychological research over the last years have resulted in publications in leading journals in the fields of physics⁵, psychology⁶, medicine⁷, the neurosciences⁸ and statistics.⁹ For a recent publication regarding this research we may refer here to *Entangled Minds* by Dean Radin.¹⁰ Until today, this research did not cause a fundamental change in the opinions of the (already convinced) general public and the (mostly sceptical) academic world.

We would like to emphasise that, in addition to Western philosophy and psychology, it may be worthwhile to study insights from contemporary physics into these phenomena.¹¹ Moreover, it can be fruitful to look at these phenomena from a non-Western perspective: traditions and philosophical cultures not troubled with static Western norms and views on what is normal and “para”normal.¹²

Philosophers

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), probably the most famous philosopher of the Enlightenment, wrote a booklet about his contemporary, the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), an author who seemed to live in a very different world, and experienced spirits and angels. In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766) Kant describes how he had one such a vision by Swedenborg investigated. Witnesses confirmed how Swedenborg, in Götenborg at the time, “saw” a fire in Stockholm, which was actually taking place at that very moment. Kant accepts the case, but wants to find out what it implies. He wonders if Swedenborg could really have been in contact with the

world of spirits and angels. Kant is open to this possibility. Nevertheless, this openness stimulates him to analyse the limits of our knowledge, an undertaking in which we can already discover his “critical period”. Later, in his magnum opus *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant explains that cases like the one he had accepted earlier could not possibly exist. Hardly underpinning his opinion with arguments, he thus dismissively seems to break away from his earlier standpoint. Kant’s position mirrors the nowadays still ambiguous attitude towards the current research practice in which these experiences are investigated. Whereas common opinion tends to adopt a favourable attitude towards exceptional phenomena, the self-declared “knowledge elite” do not deem them worthy of attention.

The philosophy of Schelling (1775-1854) considers nature and spirit as two poles that find themselves in a continuum rather than in radical opposition. A view like this leaves room for an approach to nature as something that cannot be reduced solely to the laws of physics. When speaking of the “influence of the world of spirits on nature”, Schelling does not refer to a mysterious force influencing material reality from the outside. Rather, he intends to point out the fact that nature itself, from the inside, displays powers that form part of its essence, and to which the human being, as a unity of body and spirit, has access. The human being is the kind of being, Schelling claims, in which nature has completely and fully awoken. In Schelling’s philosophy, we find the classical motifs of the “astral body”, ecstasy and subtle perception. Nevertheless, just like Kant, Schelling intends to offer a philosophical system. As a *Systemdenker*, Schelling differs radically from his later followers, for whom any systematic approach is perceived to be contrary to the “occult” qualities of nature.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) sketches in his magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation* an image in which man recognises his own body as an object of his representation, and his inner life as will. The will is the reverse side of the body. In analogy with human beings, all animate and inanimate bodies come down to an objectified will. An *Urwill*e emanates into a world of representations that come into existence and fall apart. But man appears to possess a capability to turn inwardly, and thus detach himself from the strongly determined, unfree world of representations. Following this inversion of knowledge man discovers a mysterious capability, the “dream organ” that can stimulate the brain, and can consequently bring a world of dreams and visions into existence.

Sometimes, these visions correspond to remote events taking place in the world of representations. In that case we speak of “veridical dreams”.

The “dream organ” is activated, according to Schopenhauer, by what was then called “animal magnetism”. This healing practice using the imposition of hands was taught at some fifteen German universities between 1800 and 1820, and was considered as a form of electricity transmission. The many transgressive experiences that were reported as animal magnetism’s epiphenomena (like magic, clairvoyance, somnambulism) did not only draw attention from physicians, but also from philosophers and theologians. Schopenhauer understood these phenomena as a direct and hidden operation of the will (i.e. of the world of metaphysics), an operation that works beyond causally connected representations (the world of physics). He had no doubts about the reality of such transgressive experiences, and saw them as “practical metaphysics”, i.e. as an empirical and scientific confirmation of his metaphysics of will. This led him to argue that the world of experiences as produced by the dream organ “(...) (is) from the philosophical point of view the most significant and pregnant of all discoveries that have ever been made” and that it is “(...) the duty of every scholar and man of science to become thoroughly acquainted with them.”

William James (1842-1910) was a ground-breaking pioneer in psychology. In James’ philosophy (usually called “pragmatism”) practical, everyday experiences are the touchstone for assessing the value of philosophical thinking. James argues that philosophers should only debate about issues that can be directly related to experience. This requirement disqualifies many debates from speculative metaphysics. Therefore, to some of his readers James offers just another variety of scientific positivism. But according to James, the pragmatist attitude also entails that any experience that makes itself felt is to be taken seriously by philosophy. Thus, James tries to make a case for different “wild beasts of the philosophical desert”: faith healers, mediums, mystics, people with multiple personalities, etcetera. He tries to develop a theory about such wild beasts. This theory was elaborated in his book *A Pluralistic Universe*, and it manifested signs of panpsychism.

Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was one of the most famous philosophers of the twentieth century. With Janet and Richet, among others, he participated in a movement to renew psychology in France. Bergson did experiments with hypnosis. These led him to the conviction that people should in principle be able to get access to their entire past. Our memories are not stored in the brain, he contended, and only activated when useful for our actions. Essential for our psychological functioning is a “filtering” process. The brain limits our memories instead of generating them.

According to Bergson, the same goes for perception. Perception is basically founded on the subject of perception’s coinciding with the world,

while attention only selects or filters what is relevant to the survival of our body. Basing himself on these hypotheses, Bergson suggests that after one's death, memories and perceptions are no longer hindered by the body. If more people had a hunch of the possibility of an afterlife, he argues, it could lead to a cultural revolution and could bring about a necessary correction of the materialistic consumer society. Without this correction, humanity might be doomed.

Hans Driesch (1867-1941) was a biologist and philosopher. He started his career as an empirical researcher of embryos and their development, and ended his career as a metaphysician, psychologist and parapsychologist. This is remarkable: whereas many philosophers merely speculate about nature – and sometimes wrongly so – Driesch had a solid knowledge of the composition and growth of organisms. Driesch considered himself as a philosopher of life, i.e. as someone who attributes autonomy and spontaneity to life itself. Life, then, can only be partially understood by intellectual reflection. He (re-)introduced the old Aristotelian notion of *entelechy* in order to explain how an organism develops into an entity that operates as a unity, is able to recover from injuries, and is constantly moving towards an equilibrium. According to Driesch, it is impossible to perceive this “entelechiial principle” with the senses. It can be derived empirically, though, and finally can even be accessed from within. It is therefore unsurprising that Driesch subsequently used the notion of entelechy as a basis for any possible interpretation of parapsychological phenomena. Driesch investigated telepathy and clairvoyance. For this research he tried to develop new theories and concepts. One of these concepts was the notion of the *paranormal*, which has often unjustly been taken out of its original context. In Driesch' opinion, paranormal phenomena could not yet be explained. One day, however, these phenomena would be at the heart of the life sciences, when biology and psychology will have abandoned materialism and when there will be a less restricted conception of the “normal”.

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) not only was the first “existentialist” philosopher in France; he also integrated repeated considerations of “paranormal” phenomena in his philosophy. He even showed signs of telepathic capabilities himself, as during World War I, when he was functioning as a Red Cross officer, he succeeded in tracking down several missing soldiers. This is something that has hardly been noticed by Marcel scholars up till now. All throughout Marcel's work, not only his philosophical but also his literary texts, we find testimonies of his taking seriously phenomena like telepathy, clairvoyance, and the like. We will see that, without allowing for “scientific” explanations, Marcel argues on

the basis of phenomenological and existentialist insights, giving due weight to the role of consciousness in the testified exceptional phenomena.

The work of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) has seldom been connected to exceptional human experiences. However, there are many reasons for making the connection,, one of them being that he offers an alternative understanding of exceptional experiences (here: telepathy) by providing a philosophical or a psychological analysis of consciousness. To do this, Derrida resorts mostly to Freud, a theorist who, reputedly, had many reservations regarding the phenomenon of telepathy. Now, not only do we find many experiences of synchronicity in Derrida's work, but his unravelling of the processes of consciousness also bring the exceptional within a certain reach.

"Exceptional" experiences, Derrida tries to show, are not "objective" events the existence of which can be confirmed or denied. They are adjustments of consciousness itself in its interaction with reality, and from which consciousness is inseparable. Derrida even claims that it is impossible for him to imagine consciousness to be other than telepathic. Consciousness, according to Derrida, whether it is the dreaming or the apocalyptic consciousness, is part of what it announces. It is engaged in its own message.

Starting-Points of This Book

In this book, we do not take any position regarding the truth value of research in exceptional human experiences, or regarding their most plausible interpretation. The easiest thing to do would be simply to write something like: "Driesch was still of the opinion that nature held teleological powers (...)" – to which we would then have to add a comment like: "but now we know it is impossible to prove this scientifically" – or: "nowadays we have genetic explanations that make his theories superfluous". We do not intend to discuss the truth value of the different philosophies, either. We see no need to refute the necessity of Kant's aprioristic system of thoughts, or to retort that Bergson's theories on memory and perception are incongruent with contemporary brain research.

The philosophers discussed in this book were not merely commentators on the works of others, but thinkers who followed their own sensitivity regarding the demarcations of philosophical questions, and tried to find their own answers or approximations to these questions. With respect to them, we do not want to be presumptuous and thus come up with all kinds

of criticism or corrections. All we intend to do is describe the theories, with the appropriate due regard and enthusiasm.

The different thinkers studied in this book offer us many variegated interpretations of exceptional phenomena, such as, for example, telepathy. In this book, we do not intend to make a choice between different interpretations; rather, we would like to point out the surprising differences between them. We are not only concerned with complementing the traditional, and sometimes stereotypical image of these writers. We also intend to demonstrate how it has been a challenge for each of them to approach unusual phenomena that defy our common standards of knowledge.

Do we believe in the “paranormal”? In parapsychology, exceptional human experiences are often portrayed as “anomalies” in relation to “the scientific worldview”. It thus not only becomes a question of if and how these phenomena can occur, but it additionally poses the question of whether it is possible to integrate incongruent data and theories from different sciences into an all-comprehensive, uniform theory.

In our view, science and philosophy today are in need of an openness to the complexity and equivocality of our existence. However, focusing on an artificial contrast between the ruling worldview and the anomalies that do not seem to fit, might not be much of a contribution to this openness. Most of all, a focus on this contrast leads to predictable and unfruitful quarrelling.

In sum, we do not believe so much in the “normal”. Those who research exceptional human experiences should possess some of what the poet John Keats called *Negative Capability*: the ability to dwell in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” In other words: we should be able live with an overflow of the possibilities of interpretation, without secretly longing for definitive answers.

The authors view this book as a joint effort, but each chapter carries the stamp of one of us: Hein van Dongen (James, Bergson), Hans Gerding (Kant, Schopenhauer), Rico Sneller (Schelling, Driesch, Marcel, Derrida).

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CHAPTER ONE

KANT AS A CITIZEN OF TWO WORLDS

HANS GERDING

On Swedenborg's Visions and the Limits of the Knowable

Philosophy often finds itself seriously embarrassed when it is confronted by certain stories: it is unable either to doubt some of them with impunity or to believe others without being mocked.¹³

—Immanuel Kant

The scientist, philosopher, mystic, theosophist and spirit-seer Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) received the dubious honour of having a book written about him by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In this book, Kant calls Swedenborg a fantasist whose fabrications rob us of our sleep. Swedenborg has become known mainly as the writer that Kant wiped the floor with. This is understandable, as a thinker from the Age of Reason would not have much patience with spirit-seers.

In 1766 Kant published *Dreams of a Spirit-seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*. That title is meant ironically. For how could the dreams of the spirit-seer Swedenborg be “elucidated” by dreams of metaphysics? Kant wrote his book for the enlightened mind and thought that he would be able to satisfy the reader. But – and here it comes! - at the same time, he expected this same reader to not be able to understand the message of his book. The last lines of the foreword are remarkable. Kant writes:

Given its subject-matter, it ought, so the author fondly hopes, to leave the reader completely satisfied: for the bulk of it he will not understand, parts of it he will not believe, and for the rest – he will dismiss it with scornful laughter.¹⁴

What kind of book is this? The reader, who will not understand the most important part, will be satisfied by it and enjoy it! In this chapter, we will

concentrate on what could be a possible solution to the riddle that Kant sets us here. What is the message that eludes the reader? This message, as we shall see, has to do with a philosophical implication of some of Swedenborg's extraordinary and anomalous experiences. Swedenborg experienced contact with "the other side". Kant took this more seriously than many an enlightened thinker would expect at first. Is that why the message of this book is hidden and is that why later, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), a possible experience that reveals too much, is simply abandoned? In what follows, we will make an interesting journey through Kant's work by using Kant's own texts as stepping stones.

Kant on Spirits as a Possibility

On careful reading, Kant's book *Dreams of a Spirit-seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (hereinafter referred to as *Dreams* or *Dreams of a Spirit-seer*) reveals a subtle point of view, where, apart from Kant's rejection, we also find a fascination with an important aspect of Swedenborg's experiences. In order to be able to solve the riddle that Kant sets in the Foreword, we have to read between the lines. This is not easy as *Dreams* is a book with many faces. It is playful, ironic, humorous and literary, but also confrontational and insulting. We will now pay attention to those aspects that shed light on Kant's intentionally hidden message.

Dreams consists of two parts. The first part discusses *dreams of metaphysics* and part two deals with the *dreams of a spirit-seer*. In part I, chapter One, Kant investigates what we mean when we talk about a "spirit". Unlike all the things that are impenetrable, we can see a spirit as an immaterial creature possessed with reason.

(...) beings, therefore, which lack the quality of impenetrability, will never constitute a solid whole, no matter how many of them are united together. Simple beings of this kind are called immaterial beings, and if they are possessed of reason, they are called spirits.¹⁵

To advance from the definition which explains what the concept of a spirit involves to the proposition that such natures are real, or, indeed, even merely possible, involves an unusually large step.¹⁶

The fact that we are able to think, without contradiction, of spirits as immaterial creatures possessing reason does not mean that they really exist. Kant has enough difficulty already with the mind, or soul, which together with our body forms a unity. And if death is perceived as the dissolution of this unity, we are confronted with questions that, in Kant's own words, are beyond his understanding.¹⁷ That does not imply, however,

that all this philosophizing about spirits or souls as immaterial beings could not potentially be true. It may be difficult to imagine that spirits truly exist as immaterial natures, but that does not mean that we can regard this as a known impossibility.¹⁸ Kant goes even further and allows us a glimpse into his suppositions.

I must confess that I am very much inclined to assert the existence of immaterial natures in the world, and to place my own soul in the class of these beings. (...) The reason which inclines me to this view is very obscure even to myself, and it will probably remain so, as well.¹⁹

How a Spirit-World Could Work Within Us

After this first chapter, contradictory lines of thought are presented to us; the “occult” chapter Two versus the “common sense” chapter Three. The title of chapter Two is: *A fragment of occult philosophy, the purpose of which is to reveal our community with the spirit-world.*²⁰ In this chapter, Kant claims that the conclusion of chapter One does not exclude the possibility that fantasy images that live within us can be stimulated by our contact with “the other side”, and that this contact (that we are often not aware of) will produce in us, mortal earthlings, visions.

It is thus not improbable that spirit-sensations may enter consciousness, if they arouse images in our imagination which are akin to them.²¹

Departed souls and pure spirits can never, it is true, be present to our outer senses, nor can they in any fashion whatever stand in community with matter, though *they may indeed act upon the spirit of man*, who belongs, with them, to one great republic. And *they can exercise this influence* in such a way that the representations, *which they awaken in him*, clothe themselves, according to the law of his imagination, in images which are akin to them, and create the vision of objects corresponding to them, so that they present the appearance of existing externally to him. This deception can affect any of the senses. And no matter how much the deception is intermingled with absurd figments of the imagination, *one need not let this prevent one from supposing that there are underlying spirit-influences at work here.*²² [Italics ours]

In other words: although we may not be aware of our contact with souls of the deceased and other immaterial beings as such, influences from the world of spirits could still have an effect upon us. This could take place in the following manner: these spirits stimulate images already present in our fantasy. Now we need to pay special attention to what Kant remarks about what, in the possibility outlined here, can manifest itself as an exception.

Not everyone will be aware of such an exception, as it would require a special receptivity. Kant writes:

However, if one draws up a balance of the advantages and disadvantages which could accrue to someone who was to a certain extent organized not only for the visible world but also for the invisible (assuming that there ever was such a person), such a balance would seem to be a gift like that with which Juno honoured Tiresias: she first made him *blind*, so that she could grant him *the gift of prophecy*.²³ [Italics ours].

Tiresias, who thus received the ability of knowing the future, predicted details about the life of Heracles when the latter was only a baby and revealed to Oedipus that he would kill his father and marry his mother. It turns out that Kant reckons with the possibility that influences from the spirit-world are responsible for the content of such visions, and that physical blindness would increase receptivity for them. Tiresias' visions are verifiable (we can check if they are based on truth) and extra-sensory (the content of such visions cannot be explained on the basis of normal sense perception). Further on it will become clear that it is precisely these aspects that are important to Kant when it comes down to proving that these visions do come from the other world. We will come back to this. But first we will look at what Kant has to say in this occult chapter about what is the matter with people who have these gifts.

Accordingly, it is as good as *proved*, or it could easily be *proved*, if one were willing to take the time and trouble to go into the matter, or, better still, it will one day, I know not when or where, be *proved* that the human soul, even in this life, stands in an indissoluble communion with all the immaterial natures of the spirit-world; that, standing in a reciprocal relation with these natures, it both has an effect upon them and *receives impressions from them*, though the human soul qua human being is not conscious of them, *provided that everything is in good order*.²⁴ [Italics ours]

Here it seems that Kant deliberately expresses himself hesitantly about this "evidence". In the first instance, contact with a spirit-world is "(...) as good as proved (...)", then he seems to check himself and writes that it "(...) [could] easily be proved (...)", which is finally reduced to that it will be proven in the future. As we said, it will become clear that for Kant verifiability and extra-sensory perception will have to be part and parcel of the kind of evidence he has in mind.

It is interesting to note that in this quote Kant claims that contact with the spiritual world is unconscious, "(...) *provided that everything is in good order (...)*". Here it can be read between the lines that when things

are “not in good order” something more may be the matter than just Tiresias’ blindness, namely a less unconscious contact with the other side than is usually the case in healthy persons.

So, in this “occult” chapter Kant goes one step further than in the first chapter, where he only points out that a spirit-world can be thought of as a possibility. Now he describes how contact with a spirit-world could happen without a person realizing it, and that when the person is aware of such a contact something is not in order. Here follows another quote from this “occult” chapter, in which he underlines this idea:

It is thus not improbable that spirit-sensations may enter consciousness, if they arouse images in our imagination which are akin to them (...) Phenomena of this type [and in this and in the next paragraph Kant literally writes ‘(...) genuine spirit-influence (...) real spirit-sensation (...) true spirit-influence (...)’] cannot, however, be something common and usual; they can only occur with persons whose organs* are endowed with an exceptionally high degree of sensitivity for intensifying the images of the imagination, according to the inner state of the soul, and by means of harmonious movement, and do so to a greater degree than usually happens, or, indeed, ought to happen with people of sound constitution.²⁵ [Italics ours]
[The * refers to ‘(...) not (...) the organs of outer sensation but rather the sensorium of the soul(...)’]

Kant is developing thoughts about a form of consciousness that could be receptive to influences from the other side. In this context, he explicitly speaks about a “(...) genuine spiritual influence (...) real spiritual sensation (...) true spiritual influence (...)”²⁶ about which we will obtain more evidence in the future.

Before going further into this, we first need to discuss chapter Three, in which a common-sense standpoint is presented which stands in opposition to the occult chapter Two.

Kant Protects Common-sense Against Spirit-Seeing

The title of chapter Three is: *Anti-Cabbala. A fragment of ordinary philosophy, the purpose of which is to cancel community with the spirit-world.*²⁷ This chapter explains how an incorrect interpretation of normal perception can make us believe that we are seeing things that are not really there. It also points out that strong fantasy images are sometimes indistinguishable from normal perception. A victim of such hallucinations and fantasy images mistakes his subjective impressions for objective ones, while the people around him understand that he is a victim of delusion.²⁸ A

person who has to judge these hallucinations can choose the easy way out and consider *all* hallucinations as normal delusions: in this case the possibility that there might be images that arise in us as a result of contact with the spirit-world is accordingly not an option. This is the message of chapter Three, in which, remarkably, Kant himself takes another point of view. He is not in favour of this widely held common-sense opinion.

The result of these observations involves the following embarrassing difficulty: *the deep speculations of the previous chapter* [the occult chapter two, the author] *are rendered wholly superfluous*, and the reader, no matter how ready he may be to give some support to the plans which exist only in idea, will nonetheless prefer the concept which enables him to resolve the difficulties with greater ease and speed, and which can expect more general support. For, apart from the fact that it *seems* more consonant with a rational mode of thought to draw the grounds of one's explanation from the material with which experience furnishes us rather than to lose oneself in the dizzy concepts of a reason which is half-engaged in creating fictions and half-engaged in drawing inferences, this approach also furnishes some occasion for mockery, as well; and mockery, *whether it be justified or not*, is a more powerful instrument than any other for checking futile inquiries. For to wish to offer, in a serious fashion, interpretations of the figments of the imagination of fantastical visionaries instantly arouses grave doubts; and philosophy, which allows itself to be caught in such low company, falls under suspicion.²⁹ [Italics ours]

Here, Kant says that he who accepts the argumentation in chapter Three, sides with the powers in society that “prefer the concept which enables him to resolve the difficulties with greater ease and speed, and which can expect more general support”. Kant does *not* say that this *is* “more consonant with a rational mode of thought” and that it avoids *justified* mockery, but that it “*seems* (...) more consonant with a rational mode of thought” and that it avoids mockery, *justified or not*. The door is therefore left ajar, but Kant does not want to open it any further for the reader who takes this common-sense view. The reader of this book, who, as Kant writes in the Foreword, will not understand its message, does not pay attention to the door that is ajar.

I do not, therefore, blame the reader at all if, instead of regarding the spirit-seers as semi-citizens of the other world, he simply dismisses them without further ado as candidates for the asylum, thus *saving himself the trouble of any further enquiry*.³⁰ [Italics ours]

The reader that Kant refers to will not seriously consider the possibility that some “candidates for the asylum” have seen more of reality than their

therapists. It is interesting to see that Kant himself does not choose the easy way, which would save him “the trouble of any further enquiry”. In this chapter on the common-sense point of view, Kant still takes into account “the deep speculations” from the occult Second chapter, in which it is argued that the cause of some mental occurrences may be found in contacts with a spirit-world on the other side.

I have not, in what I have said above, disputed the madness of such apparitions. On the contrary, although I have not made *madness the cause* of the imagined spirit-community, I have connected the two by supposing *madness to be a natural effect of such a community*.³¹ [Italics ours]

Kant leaves room here for the interpretation that, although common-sense thinking might not be open to this suggestion, visions or hallucinations that could be caused by influences from a spirit-world may actually exist. When subsequently, in the fourth and last chapter, Kant summarizes his argument from part I, he distances himself again from the common-sense position that he presented in chapter Three. He is unambiguous and clear about his own position, for which he refers again to the occult second chapter.

It is exactly the same ignorance which prevents my venturing wholly to deny all truth to the many different ghost-stories which are recounted, albeit with a reservation which is at once commonplace but also strange: *I am sceptical about each one of them individually, but I ascribe some credence to all of them taken together*. The reader is free to judge for himself. But for my part, the arguments adduced in the second chapter are sufficiently powerful to inspire me with seriousness and indecision when I listen to the many strange tales of this type.³² [Italics ours]

In that same last paragraph of part I, chapter Four, Kant also refers to “the reader”. We will return to this below, but this reader could be the reader that, as Kant expects in the Foreword, will not understand the tenor of his book. However that may be, Kant does not want to bother the reader any longer with his own way of thinking in this matter.

However, since there is never any lack of justifying reasons, if one’s mind is already made up beforehand, *I do not propose to incommode the reader by further extending my defence of this way of thinking*.³³ [Italics ours]

In this same paragraph, Kant writes that everything about spirits, as a comprehensive area in metaphysics, has now been dealt with and should be seen as a useless field of enquiry. Thus:

(...) prudence demands that one cut the coat of one’s projects to the cloth

of one's powers. If *great things* are beyond one's power, one must rest satisfied with what is *moderate*.³⁴ [Italics ours]

What in this last quotation is called the “great” project is the effort to clarify by reasoning the intriguing problem of seeing spirits. Kant recognizes that it is impossible to come up with an unambiguous solution to this problem. He understands that most people will adhere to the common-sense point of view, which is the easiest way. His sympathy, however, is with the arguments in the Second, “occult”, chapter. Those arguments have not only won him over to the occult point of view, but also hold out the promise of proof in the future. A proof that convinces those who hold the common-sense point of view does not yet exist, however. As pure thinking alone is not able to solve the matter, and as empirical proof is something of the future, we have to be modest. That is borne out by the last sentence of Part I, which we just cited and where it says that “if great things are beyond one's power, one must rest satisfied with what is moderate”.

As the book does not stop here, it is not too bold to think that what Kant discusses in Part II can be seen as what in his eyes is the only thing left that one can do, namely “rest satisfied with what is moderate”.

True Contact With a Spirit-World?

In Part II Kant immediately sets about investigating the “moderate”. It is what he already had expressed hesitantly in his favourite Second chapter of Part I: “(...) it will one day, I know not when or where, be proved that the human soul, even in this life, stands in an indissoluble communion with all the immaterial natures of the spirit-world”.³⁵ The “moderate” that Kant now concentrates on is an anticipating reconnoitering. It was his expectation that in the future, mankind would be confronted with solid evidence. In the first chapter of Part II he thinks about the conditions for such proof and examines if spirit stories that he knows satisfy these conditions.

Nonetheless, this circumstance [Swedenborg claiming to have cultivated the closest contact with spirits and with the souls of the dead] cannot deter those who are otherwise favourably disposed towards spirit-influences from supposing that *there is still something true behind such fantasies* [we saw that Kant sees himself as such a person]. However, the credentials of all plenipotentiaries from the other world consist in the *proofs* of their extraordinary calling, which they furnish by means of certain *specimens in the present world*. That being the case, I must, selecting from what is circulated as an attestation of the extraordinary power of the man in

question, *at least mention that which finds some credence with the majority of people (...).*"³⁶ [Italics ours]

Kant now presents verifiable cases of "specimens in the present world", a kind of prophecy that Tiresias was also able to do. We will limit ourselves to one case here. This case is about Swedenborg, who, while he was in Gothenburg, saw in a vision that Stockholm was burning. Stockholm is 285 miles away from Gothenburg. On the evening that he had the vision, many people learned about it, because Swedenborg shared his experience with the public figures that he was spending that evening with. Two days later a messenger arrived from Stockholm and confirmed what Swedenborg had seen.

Much can be said about the correctness of this and two other cases that Kant reports.³⁷ But that is not the issue here. The point is that for Kant the case of the fire in Stockholm was a true case. Moreover, there is another source that demonstrates that Kant had no doubt about this case. Three years before the publication of *Dreams*, Kant wrote a letter to Charlotte von Knobloch about spirit-seeing in general and about Swedenborg's vision of the Stockholm fire in particular.³⁸ In this letter, Kant's tone is at first reserved:

So much is certain: that regardless of the many tales of apparitions and actions in the realm of spirits that I have heard, I have always submitted these stories to the test of sound reason and have been inclined to regard such tales with scepticism. Not that I see such things as impossible (for how little do we know about the nature of a spirit?) but, taken all in all, we simply *do not find sufficient evidence* to validate them.³⁹ [Italics ours]

After this passage, Kant devotes some words to fraud and how easy it is to fool people. But then he continues his letter to Charlotte von Knobloch with the following words:

That was my position for a long time, *until* I became acquainted with the stories about Herr Swedenborg.⁴⁰ [Italics ours]

Apparently the stories about Swedenborg had changed Kant's way of thinking. We shall see that he had become convinced that the kind of proof that matters in this case had now actually been provided by Swedenborg. The case of the fire in Stockholm is special because Swedenborg had made statements in the presence of witnesses about an event of which he could have had absolutely have no knowledge whatsoever (unless one believes that accomplices of Swedenborg had set Stockholm on fire at a prearranged moment). But Kant was cautious and had the facts verified by

a friend.⁴¹ This man reported that, according to the witnesses that he had spoken to in Stockholm and in Gothenburg, the events had taken place exactly as Kant had heard them.⁴² Consequently, in the letter to Charlotte von Knobloch, Kant reports Swedenborg's vision as a powerful proof.

To give you a few more proofs, gracious lady, that many still living people witnessed, proofs that could be examined then and there by the man who reported them, let me cite the two following incidents.⁴³ [Italics ours]

[In this quote the author has adjusted the translation: 'proofs' replaces 'examples', because Kant writes 'Beweisthümer']

After voicing his doubts in the opening part of this letter, and after stating that he modified his original point of view on hearing the stories about Swedenborg, he introduces the case of the fire in Stockholm in the following manner:

However, the following incident seems to me to have *the greatest probative power* of any of these stories and *really removes any conceivable doubt*.⁴⁴ [Italics ours]

[In this quote the author has adjusted the translation: '*probative power*' replaces '*weight*', because Kant writes '*Beweiskraft*']

Although Kant writes in the letter that it would have been better if he could have questioned Swedenborg himself, he is nevertheless convinced. Possibly he would have liked to ask more questions instead of just checking the facts. But, and this is the point here, the facts "seem to have the greatest probative power" and are certain for Kant. These same facts are mentioned in *Dreams of a Spirit-seer*, in which Kant discusses the fire in Stockholm again.

The third story is such that it must be possible to furnish a complete proof of its truth or falsity. It was, if I am rightly informed, towards the end of the year 1759, when Schwedenberg [sic], returning from England, disembarked one afternoon at *Gothenburg*. That same evening he joined a company of people at the invitation of a local merchant. After he had spent some while there, he reported to the company, with every sign of consternation, that at that very moment a dreadful conflagration was raging in Stockholm in the *Südermalm*. [Italics Kant] After a few hours had passed, in the course of which he periodically withdrew to be on his own, he informed the assembled company that the fire had been brought under control, at the same time describing the extent to which the fire had spread. That very same evening, this wondrous news was noised abroad and by the next morning it had spread to every part of the town. But it was only after the lapse of two days that the report of the fire eventually reached Gothenburg from Stockholm – *a report which coincided completely, it was*