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PARANORMAL EXPERIENCE AND SURVIVAL OF DEATH. By Carl B. Becker. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. Pp. ix + 257. \$18.95, paper. C92-37751. ISBN 0-7914-1476-0.

Carl B. Becker is Professor of Comparative Thought at Kyoto University, Japan. By Professor Becker's own reckoning, *Paranormal Experience and Survival of Death* is the fruit of more than ten years of research into the various fields of philosophy, religion, science, and parapsychology. The work clearly shows it: His volume is a model of conceptual clarity, argumentative rigor, and the kind of careful, balanced approach that is characteristic of the best work in the Anglo-American tradition of analytical philosophy. But it is precisely because the book is so exemplary in this regard that it serves as a reminder, not only of the inherent limitations of that philosophical tradition and its notion of rationality—particularly as those limitations bear upon the systematic inquiry into the paranormal—but also of the shortcomings of parapsychology itself, insofar as parapsychologists themselves have explicitly or implicitly embraced this very same notion.

Becker's avowed aim is to approximate an "understanding [of] the ultimate mystery [of death] in . . . rational terms" (p. 3). It is, he says, deeply unfortunate that "people often believe far more or far less than what the evidence suggests is reasonable" (p. 2). Whereas the natural tendency of religion has been towards the former—in the process producing the sort of empirically unwarranted interpretations that William James dubbed "over-beliefs" (James, 1902/1936, p. 503)—science, on the whole, has tended towards the latter. Becker's admirable aim is to eschew both forms of unreasonableness, avoiding both the Scylla of religionism and the Charybdis of scientism, while holding to a middle path that he is aware will satisfy the enthusiastic adherents of neither side:

We must always walk a tightrope: we are examining data often ignored by the scientific community and embraced by the religious community, but we are using methodology that is advocated by the scientific community and ignored by much of the religious world. Therefore we should expect to be criticized by dogmatists from both sides of the fence. (p. 3)

In more specific terms, Becker's project is a study of the "survival hypothesis," which he defines as "the theory that some significant part of the human personality continues after the death of the physical body" (p. 2). The task of rationally vindicating belief in personal survival for those who can no longer take it as a matter of religious faith has arguably been

the central concern of parapsychology since its inception in the 19th century. In the conclusion to his monumental two-volume tome, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, co-founder of the (British) Society for Psychical Research F. W. H. Myers declared that "the central claim of Christianity is thus confirmed, as never before" (Myers, 1903/1975, p. 288). On Myers' rendering, that "central claim" is "of the soul's life manifested after the body's death" (Myers, 1903/1975, p. 288); though, in fact, for the Christian that is an absolutely minimal claim. As Michael Grosso (1992) has observed, the central claim of Christianity involves not the disembodied existence of an immortal soul—that was really Plato's idea—but rather, the resurrection of the body itself (Grosso, 1992, p. 105). (Myers, of course, was a classical scholar, hence his Platonic view of Christianity). Also, Myers believed that spiritual evolution "is our destiny, in this and other worlds . . . an evolution gradual with many gradations, and rising to no assignable close" (Myers, 1903/1975, p. 281). But this view of the infinitely progressive, essentially open-ended nature of spiritual evolution is hardly compatible with Christian orthodoxy, for which the end of humanity—communion with God and the resurrected remnant of the saved at the end of historical time—has definitely been given in biblical revelation. Moreover, if our evolutionary end is indeed a total mystery, as Myers supposed, then even the survival of a recognizably human personality is a merely provisional truth at best. For who can say what we may become?

Yet, despite the existence of an unresolved tension between Myers' Platonic ideas of the soul and modernist ideas of progress on the one hand, and the conceptual framework of Anglican orthodoxy on the other, it is probably fair to say that he regarded himself as an advocate of personal survival in the Western tradition (broadly speaking). Like Myers and other researchers before him, then, Becker's basic answer to the question, What survives? is: the human personality. For Becker, genuine survival means not merely that consciousness in some form or other persists after the death of the physical body, but that personal identity is preserved, such that "[after death] I [will] still continue to remember my previous self and my experiences. I [will] continu[e] to have experiences, desires, and even quirks of personality" (pp. 183–184).

Although he acknowledges in passing the possibility of more impersonal and less individualistic forms of survival, such as "a sense of union with 'collective unconscious,' . . . an 'explosion' or expansion of consciousness into transpersonal states, or into other states of disembodied consciousness difficult to depict or identify" (p. 185), Becker devotes less than a page of his book to an examination of these alternatives. He notes almost in passing, for example, that in the Buddhist tradition, the achievement of the ultimate (personless) state of nirvanic release is not automatic at death: "People with normal desires and cravings will soon be reborn into other bodies, and only those most transcendent and desireless of persons can achieve a personless nirvanic state at death" (p. 185). Becker under-

scores his belief that any form of nonpersonal survival will be the exception rather than the rule by citing Harry Price and John Hick, both of whom, he says, "recognize the possibility of transcendent nirvanic states after death, but they deny they will be automatic. Instead, they hold, these states must be achieved [only] after much further spiritual development" (p. 185).

But Becker does not pause to consider in any depth how these further possibilities might bear upon the deeper meaning of "survival." For even if it is granted that "nirvanic states" are not automatically attained and are exceptional, it may be that by changing the focus of our attention from the average to the exceptional, our understanding of what it means to survive death will likewise be transformed. If, say, I were a visiting anthropologist from another galaxy and inquired of my human hosts, "Well, what is this 'art' thing you keep mentioning?" they might decide to show me a kindergarten class doing fingerprinting. But wouldn't a trip to the Louvre also be in order? For it is by studying the most excellent examples of art—the ones that open us to new possibilities—that we learn the true meaning of "art." Similarly, a Buddhist might say that we really cannot comprehend the meaning of "survival" if we focus our attention on penultimate, rather than ultimate, truths. As William James maintained, the meaning of a thing is revealed only in its fullest development—which suggests that the earlier stages of that development cannot be properly understood apart from their relationship to the later stages.

Given his academic credentials, I found Becker's hastiness in dealing with these points especially surprising. I had expected a more sustained, if not more sympathetic, treatment of impersonalist views of survival, which are distinctively—though not, of course, exclusively—Eastern. But perhaps, as the old saying goes, East is East, and West is West. Because Christianity posits a personal creator-god as the ultimate metaphysical principle, it has accordingly judged personhood as the highest good and personal immortality as a most desirable (and reassuring) outcome. Yet, this is not universally the case. As the late Joseph Campbell was fond of pointing out, the East has always tended to regard the ultimate in more impersonal terms, as a cosmic principle or energy, and its deities are viewed as but secondary personifications of this impersonality. In the West, he said, the view is that God creates everything, including the energy of the universe, of which he is the ultimate source. But in the East, the view is that the energy is the primordial source; it is, inexplicably, just there, antecedent to the gods, who function as the vehicles or manifestations of that energy. The gods, in other words, are metaphysical and psychological projections (these two categories being mutually interdependent and inseparable). Hence the emphasis in the East on the desirability of escaping the round of reincarnation or rebirth and thereby achieving liberation from the sphere of mere personality. By appearing to sidestep this issue, however, Becker only reinforces the Western prejudice in favor of the personal.

What this suggests is that it may not be possible, in the end, to separate the facts of survival from the different, and in some cases competing, values that are attached to them; for what and how we see is essentially conditioned by our aims and desires. Now the fact/value dichotomy has been a basic premise of all so-called "scientific" philosophy. Logical positivist philosophers such as A. J. Ayer have typically held that there exist two entirely separate realms: There is, on the one hand, a realm of objectively measurable phenomena of which one can have genuine knowledge—this is the realm of cold, hard, scientific fact. On the other hand, there is the realm of values, which are purely subjective, the expressions of squishy emotions: arbitrary, irrational, and hence, on the positivists' view, cognitively meaningless. (After all, one person's meat is another's poison.) We must set aside values in order to examine facts. And in one version or another, the thesis of value-neutrality has also found its way into analytical philosophy, the successor to logical positivism as the predominant school in the academic centers of the English-speaking world. Analytical philosophers see their task as strictly critical or analytic, and thus as limited to testing for the validity of arguments and the coherence of concepts through the clarification of semantic meanings within a given discipline or subject-area. An analytical philosopher of history, for example, would not presume to pronounce upon such "speculative" matters as whether history as a whole has any "meaning" (in the sense of value or purpose), or even whether a given historical event should be judged as representing a fortunate or unfortunate outcome. Similarly, an analytical philosopher of religion would not judge the desirability of reincarnation. But this kind of agnosticism may only be a chimera. If so, it would be better to make this explicit.

It is also worth noting in this regard that Becker fails to mention Charles Tart's advocacy of the impersonalist view (Tart, 1990) even while he enthusiastically endorses Tart's well-known concept of state-specific knowledge. Becker strongly supports Tart's proposal for a research program in which (what Becker calls) the "ideational realms" (p. 181) of reality accessed by altered states of consciousness would be mapped by teams of explorers who are capable, not only of deliberately inducing such states in themselves in a controlled way, but also of reporting back and systematically analyzing their findings.

Now Tart himself has discerned a very close connection indeed between the project of a comprehensive phenomenological mapping of altered (or in Stanislaw Grof's favored terminology, "nonordinary") states of consciousness and the impersonalist view of survival. Noting that our emotions, evaluative processes, memory, and other mental habits and functions operate quite differently depending upon whether we are waking, dreaming, meditating, or taking a hallucinogen, Tart decisively rejects the belief in a bedrock personal identity. On his view, what survives these various transitions—and thus what is likely to survive the most radical transition of bodily death, then—is not our ordinary waking sense of "I," which is but

a single aspect of our identity (and one intimately linked to body-based processes), but rather, that far more impersonal form of consciousness that is experienced in meditative states as the detached observer or pure "witness" (Tart, 1990, p. 143; p. 146; p. 151). It is thus the exploration of the impersonal or transpersonal dimension of consciousness within life that prepares us for the afterdeath condition. But if he does not agree with Tart's own interpretation of his research proposal, Becker has not exactly made the basis of that disagreement clear—if indeed there is any real disagreement (see below).

This omission may rank as the only obvious flaw in Becker's otherwise extremely well-crafted, scrupulously careful argument. Virtually the first half of the book (Chapters 1–3) is given over to an exceedingly rigorous critical examination of the empirical evidence for personal survival, including reincarnation (Chapter 1), apparitions and out-of-body experiences (Chapter 2), and near-death experiences (Chapter 3). Based on this analysis—which at every stage includes a thorough but concise consideration of actual or possible critical objections—Becker arrives at the relatively modest conclusion that "there is good evidence that some persons have survived death in the past and, by induction, that some people now living will continue to have conscious personal experiences after bodily death" (p. 186).

Becker shies away from any more systematic or absolutist claims of the form that we all survive in precisely the same sense. Indeed, he is careful to point out (Chapter 6) that if postmortem existence is essentially a mental or mind-dependent world, we should expect to find some significant variations in postmortem experience that are commensurate with the differences in individual mental attitudes, habits, dispositions, expectations, and so forth. Furthermore, he points out, there is no good reason to suppose that, even if everyone survives, we will all remain in the "next world" in precisely the same way. If, for example, reincarnation is a fact, then at least some nonphysical persons will return to this world. Moreover, given that "most people die without reporting any remarkable experiences or saving grace . . . we are not entitled to jump to the conclusion that everyone will survive death or be reborn" (p. 166). Thus it is not so much that Becker positively rejects the possibility of an ultimate transpersonal or selfless survival, but that this would only be true for some—perhaps only a few rare—individuals; and in any case, it goes far beyond the far more limited claim of a penultimate form of personal survival (p. 186).

But as Becker observes, there are critics from both orthodox science and orthodox religion who, out of very different motives, have resisted (and are likely to continue to resist) even a modest conclusion of such "limited scope" (p. 188). In both instances, he suggests, this resistance is essentially nonrational in origin, meaning that it is ultimately based, not upon an impartial examination of the empirical evidence, but rather, on certain a priori ideological prejudices and preconceptions which neither side—out of fear—is prepared to surrender, or even seriously question.

In Chapter 4, "The Philosophy of Science," and Chapter 5, "A Model of Resistance and Change in the Sciences," then, Becker offers a sustained analysis of the thinking of the rejectionists at great length—particularly the skeptical scientific ones. Following Thomas Kuhn's analysis of the tendency of scientists educated within the prevailing scientific paradigm or worldview simply to deny the existence of anomalous observations, Becker argues that is in reality "the diagnostic conservatism and mechanism of many scientists . . . [which leads them] to denigrate the importance and deny the legitimacy of survival research" (p. 145). Whereas, he notes, developments in quantum mechanics have led many contemporary physicists to question or reject the Newtonian paradigm of the clockwork universe, much of the establishment of the biological, social, and psychological sciences nevertheless remains inextricably wedded to the old paradigm (p. 143). Stooping to name-calling and ad hominem attacks on survival researchers, these dogmatic skeptics are typified by "the blunt and obstinate sort of rejection published in *Science* that 'not a thousand experiments with ten million trials and by a hundred separate investigators' could lead the individual [writer] to accept survival" (p. 148). Although Becker acknowledges that "we might have to devise new methodologies of science to investigate a realm that is in essence capable of being experienced but mind-dependent and nonmaterial" (p. 180), he argues that there is nothing in survival research as such that requires the sacrifice of mathematics, logic, or causality (p. 142).

Nevertheless, out of a "fear . . . born of ignorance and [the] reluctance to revise old ideas" (p. 142), most scientific skeptics have been either unwilling or unable to follow the conspicuous example of Marcello Truzzi. Truzzi, who founded the journal *Zetetic*, began as a committed debunker of the paranormal, but gradually became less convinced of the unreality of all paranormal phenomena, and progressively more uncomfortable and disenchanted with the dogmatic skepticism of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal. As a result, he went on to found a new journal, *Zetetic Scholar*, in which dialogues representing both sides of an argument are presented. Becker cites Truzzi as an example of conceptual change by way of gradual evolution: "Truzzi says (from experience) that we cannot change science by convincing the skeptics, who are not open to such conversion in the first place, but only by slowly persuading the more liberal and open-minded members of the scientific community" (p. 160).

Although Becker does not rule out the possible use or importance of such persuasion, his principal hope lies elsewhere. Survival studies have survived, he argues, principally because investigators weary of rejection and suppression by orthodox science went on to establish independent centers of research "which will enable their communication and recognition of new ideas" (p. 154). These new centers include both alternative publications and professional organizations (e.g., the International Association of Near-Death Studies, or IANDS, and its *Journal of Near-Death*

Studies; the Society for Scientific Exploration, or SSE, and its *Journal of Scientific Exploration*). In the meantime, the older generation of dogmatic skeptics, with their "blind faith in . . . materialistic metaphysics" (p. 148), are being "supplanted by a new breed of scientists who have themselves experimented with meditation and mind-altering drugs, and who can no longer accept the mechanistic philosophy of the nineteenth century and are hence much more open to the possibilities of survival research" (p. 162). Becker still hopes that this generational change will lead to the embrace of survival research by a transformed scientific establishment—a transformation that has been forecast by the revolutionary developments in twentieth-century physics.

On the other hand, Becker does not appear to hold out much hope for the religious establishment. Although "orthodox churchmen" (p. 144) would find themselves in general agreement with the fact of survival, they are not keen on proving it by reason and experience; for Christianity has classically regarded the survival of the nonmaterial person as primarily or exclusively a matter of faith (p. 3; p. 144). That is to say, the soul survives not because of its true nature or its inherent potentiality, but simply because of the free gift of divine grace; God wills it—if He so chooses. Becker cites examples in which fundamentalist Christian writers have set out to debunk claims regarding reincarnation—even though, in the process, they clearly demonstrated no firsthand familiarity with the claims in question (p. 25). The hostility of conservative Christians to the authority of inward experience over church dogma or biblical tests and their frequent attempts to connect paranormal phenomena, such as astral travel and channeling, with demonic or diabolical forces, provides further evidence and expression of this attitude.

Given the continuing resurgence of religious fundamentalism not only worldwide but especially here in America, one wishes that Becker had had a bit more to say about the religious rejectionists, to whom he gives comparatively short shrift. In his recent and important study *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend*, sociologist Jeffrey S. Victor (1993) reports that by 1990, "charges of Satanic, occult, and New Age content had emerged . . . as the most common accusations of would-be censors of educational materials" (Victor, p. 160). According to Victor, the American Library Association reports that groups of Christian fundamentalists have sought to remove from the shelves of local public libraries books about "traditional folk stories and fairy tales about witches, demons, ghosts, and the like, books about the history and the nature of witchcraft and magic, and even books of Halloween stories" (pp. 160–161). Although to date these incidents (including court cases in Florida and Tennessee) may not have had any measurable effect on the professional study of the paranormal in general and survival research in particular, one cannot help wondering whether this will continue to be the case in the future. If orthodox science can successfully marginalize or discredit controversial or unpopular areas of inquiry, is it possible that a culturally and

politically powerful religious fundamentalism will stifle free inquiry into the paranormal? More work of a sociological and philosophical kind urgently needs to be done in this area. Parapsychologists ought to be paying close attention.

At a key point in his discussion of the irrationality of the critics of survival research, Becker suggests that the discipline of philosophy is characteristically superior, in terms of rationality, to the disciplines of the natural sciences:

In the course of their educations, philosophers are expected to learn a wide range of unpopular as well as popular theories, and to discern the important truths or fatal mistakes in each system. By contrast . . . scientific education tends to be monolithic, monovalent, and to emphasize the superiority and correctness of its own peculiar metaphysics. (p. 141)

Becker's contrast between the monomania and intolerance of science and the pluralism and tolerance of philosophy is ironic, for modern philosophy was born in a crisis of pluralism. "Of philosophy," wrote René Descartes in 1637:

I shall say only that . . . there is nothing about which there is not some dispute—and thus nothing that is not doubtful . . . and . . . considering how there can be various opinions that are held by learned people about the very same matter without there ever being any more than one opinion being true, I took to be virtually false everything that was merely probable. (Descartes, 1637/1980, p. 5)

Descartes quit his course of studies as he was about to graduate La Flèche precisely because he was not satisfied with merely probable knowledge: He wanted instead an unambiguous, unalloyed, ironclad truth, a truth "so firm and so certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics [would be] unable to shake it" (Descartes, 1637/1980, p. 17). He employed the method of radical doubt only in order to overcome doubt once and for all, thus utterly vanquishing the skeptic. Descartes, in other words, wanted a secular faith.

Parapsychology has been infected with the philosophy of Cartesianism virtually since its inception, in the sense that it has often addressed itself (even in what Becker describes as its movements towards institutional independence) to its most skeptical challengers, in the hopes of defeating them once and for all, with decisive and incontrovertible proof. This was true even before parapsychology came to reject its early, anecdotal approach (in which researchers gathered oral and written testimony in hopes of validating narratives of personal experiences) in favor of the purely statistical approach. When parapsychologists shifted from the historical to the scientific model, it was not because of any change in their core aspirations; certainty was their aim all along. They merely decided that the historical method would never provide it. James G. Matlock has suggested in these very pages that parapsychology has horribly disfigured itself with

a "misguided conservatism" which has, as its base, the belief that "the only sure road to scientific respectability is experimentation in the laboratory" (Matlock, 1987, p. 396). But perhaps the root cause lies even deeper than that. It might be argued that by failing to make the absolutely crucial distinction between what the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood termed *criticism* and *skepticism*, parapsychologists set themselves an impossible task:

for a critic is a person able and willing to go over somebody else's thoughts for himself to see if they have been well done; whereas a sceptic is a person who will not do this; and because you cannot make a man think, any more than you can make a horse drink, there is no way of proving to a sceptic that a certain piece of thinking is sound, and no reason to take his denials to heart. (Collingwood, 1956, p. 252)

Becker demonstrates that he, unlike many in parapsychology, is at least aware of this key distinction. This becomes evident, for example, when he reports on Marcello Truzzi's admonition to concentrate on persuading only the more liberal and open-minded members of the scientific community; or when he decries the scientific dogmatist's refusal to genuinely consider the evidence. Nevertheless, in spite of this awareness—and in spite of his own professed willingness to settle for (merely) rigorously demonstrable probable conclusions regarding survival (p. 188)—Becker's own philosophical approach is so thoroughly informed by Cartesian assumptions and concepts that he takes with one hand what he gives with the other. Not only does this undermine his own specific argument, but it also deprives parapsychology of its inherently revolutionary power and significance (both epistemologically and metaphysically speaking).

In this regard, Becker's treatment of the near-death experience is crucial and revealing. Whereas Kenneth Ring, Raymond Moody, and other key researchers have treated the descriptions of NDEs as a whole, emphasizing the narrative structure in which the various reported phenomena (the OBE, tunnel, beings of light, etc.) are embedded, Becker proposes to employ a quite different approach:

Rather than accepting or rejecting a whole theory as to the nature of death [or the near-death experience], we shall examine each discrete type of experience in turn to see what its evidential value is. Some of the experiences [in the NDE] are clearly not unique to dying situations but have perfectly good neurophysiological explanations. Therefore, we shall . . . not discuss . . . OBEs . . . "the life review" . . . [the] tunnel . . . [all of] which have good physiological origins and explanations. (p. 78)

Becker's approach clearly resembles Descartes's analytical-reductive method. "Descartes's maxims," writes Peter Skagestad (1975), specify "that large and unwieldy questions should be broken down into their component parts, and that simple questions should be tackled before complex ones" (p. 14). For Becker, the heart of NDEs are the deathbed visions

of departed relatives, spirit guides or other religious figures, and heavenly or otherworldly realms.

But it may be asked whether something of essential importance is not left out when the NDE is analyzed in this reductive, piecemeal fashion. Might the essential *meaning* of the experience as a whole not be lost or distorted when its narrative structure is ignored or denied? Is the whole the mere sum of its parts? Or, using Becker's own biological metaphor: Can the functioning of one organ (the visionary "heart" of NDEs) be understood in isolation from the rest of the organic system? Even, say, if a phenomenon is not unique in all its aspects to dying, does that entail it is not, in some form, an essential part of the dying process? Although, for example, love is not unique to marriage, might it not reasonably be judged an essential component of the marriage relationship?

Furthermore, I do not know of any proponent of materialism who has managed to undermine the antireductionist point made by William James in his lecture on human immortality (James, 1898/1960). James argued that just because an experience is partly explainable in neurophysiological terms, that does not entail that that experience is nothing but a neurophysiological event. Granted that mind is a function of the brain, it does not necessarily follow, he observed, that mind is produced by the brain in the way that urine is a mere byproduct of the kidneys. There are, he noted, relations of functional dependence other than that of production—for example, transmission:

In the case of a colored glass, a prism, or a refracting lens, we have transmissive function. The energy of light, no matter how produced, is by the glass sifted and limited in color, and by the lens or prism determined to a certain path and shape, (pp. 290-291)

James's point, of course, was that there is nothing in science itself and as such which demonstrates that the brain creates, rather than merely sifts and limits thought; that the mind-body identity thesis is an unproven metaphysical assumption; and furthermore, that there is good empirical evidence (of the kind produced by parapsychology) that seriously questions that assumption, making the transmissive hypothesis even *more* reasonable than the productive hypothesis (mind-body identity).

If we were to set aside or "bracket" the evidence of parapsychology and related disciplines, then the two hypotheses might appear equally reasonable. Given that Becker himself suggests that we ought to refrain from proposing what we cannot decisively prove, it is curious to find him apparently willing to accord the materialist position *more* prima facie weight by virtually disallowing those features of the NDE that might have a neurophysiological basis. Kenneth Ring (1984/1985), on the other hand, has affirmed his belief that although "there is a *biological* basis for NDEs," his interpretation "honors rather than explains away the transcendental features of the phenomenon" (p. 229). (Ring had used the model of kundalini arousal in his explanation.) It is not exactly clear why Becker is

apparently willing to go beyond James and Ring to concede that neurophysiology explains away at least some key features of the NDE. Are there good empirical and logical grounds for this concession? Or is it merely the sort of tactical nod to the cultural power of metaphysical materialism that James G. Matlock identified as symptomatic of parapsychology's "misguided conservatism"?

Consider, in this regard, Becker's summary dismissal of the life review. He claims that "neurophysiological explanations of *the* [italics added] life-review are readily available" (p. 80). Becker cites the work of Wilder Penfield and other researchers who have correlated the process of vivid memory recall with the electrical stimulation of certain portions of the temporal cortex, as well as the work of Noyes and Kletti, who "trace the life-review to seizure-like firings of neurons in the temporal lobes of the brain" (p. 80). Now Becker's use of the definite article here (*the* life-review) is odd, given that in the immediately preceding paragraph, he acknowledged the wide variety of reported experiences brought under this heading:

This variation in life-reviews is quite interesting. If the life-review were based purely on memories recorded in the brain, we should expect people to remember past situations from the body-centered perspective from which their senses recorded the experience. But many people see themselves from a third-party perspective, as if in a movie or OBE. (p. 80)

It is, however, highly revealing that what Becker fails to mention are the cases in which NDErs like Tom Sawyer report an identification with the inner experiences (including emotions) of *other* individuals in the remembered scenes (Farr, 1993, p. 36)—a phenomenon that strongly suggests a form of mystical identification or extrasensory form of information acquisition. These cases (some of which are veridical in principle if not in fact) provide striking counterexamples to the memory hypothesis. But even though he acknowledges the third-party or disembodied perspective experience, Becker concludes: "Variations in the life-review experience might be due to variations either in the seizures or in memory-storage mechanisms . . . the possibility of such neurophysiological explanations for these experiences tends to depreciate the evidentiality as indications of a future life" (p. 80). Yet, by what semantic stretch of the term "memory" could these physiological mechanisms explain, for example, Sawyer's certainty that in his NDE he experienced himself as a two-month-old child through the eyes of his adoring, if emotionally ambivalent, mother? Is this really an insignificant variation?

What I am suggesting is that by stripping the NDE of its narrative framework, Becker distorts both the nature and potential significance of the experience; his reductionism makes him liable to misdescribe as well as to misinterpret. Hence the very intelligibility of the NDE is threatened. And this would seem to be a direct result of his tacit acceptance of the

Cartesian view that only those ideas that we can conceive very clearly and very distinctly are candidates for truth; or, in other words, that only separateness is real, and wholeness is at best secondary, derivative, or epiphenomenal—if not illusory, misleading, and erroneous. But is this in truth a fruitful approach?

As Alasdair MacIntyre (1971) has observed, one of Descartes' most vehement critics was his younger contemporary and fellow countryman, the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. Pascal summed up his deep skepticism about clear and distinct ideas in a single witty epigram: "Too much clarity darkens" (cited in MacIntyre, 1971, p. 80). But was this intellectual skepticism merely a mask for a reactionary religious obscurantism? Pascal had been a follower of the radical Augustinian Archbishop Cornelius Jansen; and Jansen agreed with St. Augustine that "we are too weak to discover the truth by reason alone and for this reason need the authority of sacred books" (St. Augustine, 397/1961, p. 117). For Augustine, Jansen, and also Pascal, this weakness was an aspect of Original Sin. And so we might be tempted to conclude that Pascal's criticism of Descartes can be dismissed as the tactic of a religious apologist, and so it lacks intrinsic philosophical significance. But as the following excerpt from Pascal's *Pensées* shows, that conclusion would be too hasty:

If man were to begin by studying himself, he would see how incapable he is of going beyond himself. How would it be possible for a part to know the whole? But he may perhaps aspire to a knowledge of at least those parts which are on the same scale as himself. But the different parts of the world are all so closely linked and related together that I hold it to be impossible to know one without knowing the other and without knowing the whole. (In MacIntyre, 1971, p. 80)

Although his commitment to the doctrine of Original Sin made him skeptical about the possibility of any purely human knowledge, Pascal's mystical bent (he was quite taken with the esoteric saying of medieval hermeticism that "God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere") led him to adumbrate a version of what has since come to be known as the holographic model of reality, in which, paradoxically, unity is the same as identity and each part *is* (also) the whole. And it is precisely in such a context that those specific forms of Cartesian or analytical reasoning that affirm and presuppose the ultimate separateness of things break down irretrievably; for it turns out, on closer inspection, that the whole is *not* really the superadded sum of parts that are essentially atomic (isolated, self-existent) in nature. In other words, the evident separateness that we experience in ordinary life and find confirmed in Cartesian-Newtonian thinking, although true from one—albeit very limited—perspective, is hardly the whole truth.

This is the conclusion that has been reached by virtually every thorough student of the paranormal. "Separateness' is unnatural," writes Colin Wilson, "the true and natural state of affairs is a basic 'connectedness,'

just as [P.D.] Ouspensky realized during his mystical experiments . . . [only] most human beings have given up any attempt to see things as a whole" (Wilson, 1988, p. 42). But not all. As Stanislav Grof (1988) has observed after more than 30 years of research into nonordinary states of consciousness:

Many transpersonal experiences involve events from . . . realms that cannot be directly reached by human senses . . . or from periods that historically precede the origin of the solar system, formation of the planet Earth, appearance of living organisms, development of the central nervous system, and appearance of *homo sapiens*. This clearly implies that, in a yet unexplained way, each human being contains the information about the entire universe or all of existence, has potential experiential access to all its parts, and, in a sense, is the whole cosmic network, as much as he or she is just an infinitesimal part of it, a separate and insignificant biological entity. (Grof, 1988, pp. 162-163)

From Cartesian reductionism, through Bertrand Russell's logical atomism and A. J. Ayer's logical positivism, to the equally rigorous but far more subtle empiricism of the dean of the American philosophical establishment, Harvard's W. V. O. Quine, the tradition of philosophical analysis has unquestioningly presupposed and embodied the view that the universe is basically a giant mechanism which can and must be taken apart (in thought if not in actuality) and studied by the specialized physical sciences, which are the only valid forms of knowledge. "The belief that it is the business of the philosopher to . . . study . . . reality as a whole . . . is so vague . . . [and] metaphysical," Ayer had written in his epochal 1936 work, *Language, Truth and Logic* ("metaphysical" having been the pejorative term used as a synonym for "unscientific nonsense") that "to assert, as some do, that 'reality as a whole' is somehow generically different from the reality which is investigated piecemeal by the special sciences . . . is a delusion" (Ayer, 1936/1952, pp. 47-48). Hence, the Cartesian attempt to defeat the skeptic once and for all, the positivists' horror of "metaphysical" claims and "speculative" modes of thought, and the "misguided conservatism" of parapsychologists are all of a piece. Or so I am suggesting.

I also want to suggest that it is indeed precisely because paranormal inquiry (*especially* survival research) offers a radical challenge to the fundamental assumptions of Cartesianism in general and the established forms of Anglo-American philosophical understanding and practice in particular, that it is ultimately of great philosophical import. There is consequently a built-in limit to the kinds of questions that can be raised about the analytical framework from inside it by those who would employ its vocabularies and remain wedded (consciously or not) to its modes, habits, and styles of thought. Professor Becker's impressive book, while it takes us to that very limit, does not—indeed cannot—transcend it. This is not because of any specific errors of inadequacies on his part, but because the tradition which speaks through him can go no further. That key task must be left to others.

More than a decade ago, Steven M. Rosen argued that

progress in parapsychology hinges on a fundamental shift from being an enterprise whose first order of business is the accumulation of knowledge (to be followed by applications) to being one in which the primary goal is a therapeutic mending of our deeply destructive polarization [and fragmentation]. (Rosen, 1994, p. 178)

Rhea A. White has likewise argued that parapsychology will progress only if it consciously and wholeheartedly commits itself to the annihilation of the old dualisms of the scientific temperament, virtually all of which—including the dichotomies of fact and value, data and interpretation, rational and empirical, observer and observed, and so forth—are primordially grounded in the philosophical dualism of subject and object:

What holds parapsychologists back, I believe, is not lack of personal integrity and courage. I think that misguided loyalty to an unnecessarily restrictive view of the scientific method is the main problem. I feel it is a cop-out for parapsychologists to aim at building bridges to other sciences by trying to convince others that we are just like any other science in our approach and that we differ only in our subject matter, even as physics differs from biology and biology from chemistry. Premier experimental parapsychologist Rex Stanford . . . insists that parapsychologists must choose whether they are to be shamans or scientists, but I strongly disagree. Parapsychology is not and cannot ever be just another science. I think we are something new. I think the ideal parapsychologist is both a scientist and a shaman, both an empiricist and a religionist, both an observer and an artist. We have been criticized strongly . . . for trying to find religious meaning in parapsychological data . . . But what if that is the way forward? (White, 1990/1994a, p. 28; cf. White, 1994b, pp. 42–43)

If Rosen and White are correct in their belief that the core message of parapsychology is the ultimate connectedness and mutual interpenetration of all things, then it would seem that the discipline can only heal its internal self-estrangement by consciously seeking to embody that very integration in its approach, rather than merely studying and analyzing that wholeness as if from an (impossible and artificial) external vantage point. Rosen and White's call, if widely heeded, would produce a revolutionary transformation of a truly momentous kind—the mother of all paradigm shifts.

There are several obvious bibliographical errors that await correction in a future edition of the book. The title of the "ground-breaking tome" by Gurney, Myers, and Podmore is inaccurately referred to on page 44 as *Phantoms* [sic] of the *Living* rather than the correct *Phantasms*. Also, in a footnote on page 197, Rosalind Heywood's name is misspelled as Rosaline. But these exceedingly minor blemishes do not lessen the value of Becker's extensive notes and bibliography, which are extremely useful in and of themselves.

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