

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCES*

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The term ‘inaugural address’ is especially applicable this day. In ancient Rome, important decisions depended on auspicia, literally ‘bird-watching’.¹ The auguries, a college of birdwatchers, interpreted the movements of birds in flight as omens upon which they based their predictions. Divination, mantics, fortune-telling are terms used for such practices, sometimes referred to as occult or esoteric, that claim a certain way of knowing and that fall within the field of inquiry of this special Chair, for which today it is my pleasure to accept professorship.

I hope all of you, like the ancient college of auguries, will today watch my flight – my inaugural address, the first words of which I have just spoken and with which on this festive day I will officially accept my appointment.

The Wisdom of a Puppet

When the American philosopher Jean Houston received the Gardner Murphy Award from the American Society for Psychical Research in 1993, in her acceptance speech she related an interesting story she herself had witnessed. Her father Jack Houston, a speech writer, had to deliver a manuscript to the famous ventriloquist Edgar Bergen. Father Houston, accompanied by his daughter Jean, went to the dressing room where Edgar was preparing himself for the show. They overheard the ventriloquist, who was sitting with his back towards the door and had not noticed them enter, as he was talking to his puppet Charley. The conversation between Edgar Bergen and his puppet, however, did not remotely resemble preparation for a performance. Bergen posed profound philosophical questions to Charley, like ‘What is the meaning of life’, ‘What does it actually mean to be a good man’, ‘Where is the human soul?’ According to Jean Houston the puppet Charley gave incredibly good answers. His insights were astonishing. He appeared to possess the wisdom of ages. Father and daughter Houston, who stood behind Bergen’s back listening, were deeply impressed. When Jack Houston made their presence known, Edgar Bergen turned around and said, quite embarrassed: “Hello, Jack

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¹ Lat. avi-spicium: avia=bird, spicere=watch.

and Jean, you have taken us a bit by surprise!”. When Jack Houston asked what was going on, Bergen replied: “I am in conversation with Charley. He is very wise and philosophical.”. Jack Houston now became serious, asking “But isn’t it your voice and your knowledge coming from the mouth of the puppet?”. The ventriloquist replied: “Yes, Jack, that’s what I first thought. But, you know, what Charley says goes so much deeper than everything I know.”²

Where does puppet Charley’s wisdom come from? Without doubt it is Edgar Bergen, the ventriloquist, who is speaking those words. However, if this wisdom indeed transcends the ventriloquist’s own knowledge, must we not then consider the possibility that, just like his puppet, the ventriloquist’s own words are also being breathed into him – literally that he himself is being ‘in-spired’.³ What could this breath be?

The question that I wish to raise is about ‘transcendent experiences’, a collective term comprising a multitude of diverse and partly overlapping experiences that can occur during trance, mysticism, kundalini, mediumship, and during so-called near-death and psychic experiences.⁴ After having such an experience, one often reports amazing sensations, like out-of-body perceptions, communication with angels or the dead, union with a divine light, union with one’s fellowman, plants or animals or even with water or fire, as well as opposite sensations like being torn to pieces or disintegrating. To begin, three things can be determined with certainty. Firstly, such transcendent experiences actually do occur.⁵ Secondly, such experiences have always been reported, here and elsewhere, today and in the past.⁶ Thirdly, many such experiences have ‘power of expression’. They may be constitutive for one’s orientation towards the world or the self.⁷

The expressive power of transcendent experiences

There are scholars investigating the hypothesis that the common direction taken by various religious ideologies from their origins onward is based upon universal transcendent experiences. This is known as the ‘experiential source hypothesis’, i.e., anomalous experiences as crucial factor in the establishment of religion.⁸ It goes without saying that the concept ‘God’ cannot be considered apart from mystical experiences, or ‘Ascension’ apart from out-of-body experiences, or ‘prophecy’ apart from experiences of precognition.

² Krippner (2000) p. 5.

³ Van Dongen (1985).

⁴ Cardeña et al. (2001, p. 5). See exceptional human (also called anomalous) experiences on the websites of researcher dr. Rhea White (<http://www.ehe.org/>) and of prof. dr. Charles Tart, The Archives of Scientists Transcendent Experiences (Taste) (<http://www.issc-taste.org/>).

⁵ James McClenon (1994, p. 3), calls these experiences ‘sociologically real’.

⁶ The near-death experience that Plato described (Plato, *The Republic*, X613–X621) shows similarities with what people today can experience during a state of clinical death (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1982, 1985; Greyson, 2001; Opdebeeck, 2001). Comparative research on death-bed visions of people who die has shown a correlation of experiences reported in the USA and in India (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977). Researchers on Shamanism point to similarities in shamanism around the world (Eliade, 1974; Harner, 1990). Out-of-body experiences are found throughout time and in all cultures (Poortman, 1967; Van Dongen & Gerding, 1993). Jung points out similarities between his patients and alchemy (Jung, 1953).

⁷ It is not self-evident that objective reality belonging to ordinary daily consciousness should be given a higher status than the hyperlucid and highly integrated and integrating insight of a mystical experience (D’Aquili & Newberg (1993) p. 197). Various researchers who first adopted a neutral standpoint during their investigations often find themselves later unable to offer resistance to the overwhelming impressions that some of these experiences have made upon them (Wulf (2001) p. 428).

⁸ McClenon (1994, pp. 182–184, 238–240). We also find such thoughts, e.g., in William James (1979 [1902] p. 50), Stanislav Grof (2000, pp. 214–215) and Erich Neumann (1973b, pp. xxii–xxiv). The latter has further developed the meaning of this for ethics according to the psychology of Jung (Neumann, 1973a).

In this ‘experiential source hypothesis’ we can also catch a glint of an important fundamental principle and inspirational source for theosophy: i.e., mankind as brotherhood, united by the common denominator of the universal character of ‘transcendent experiences with expressive power’, which point towards unity beyond the differences dividing various world religions. Today universal themes in the world’s religions are also seen as reflections of the universality of our neurophysiological substratum.⁹ Concerning ‘transcendent experiences’, I want to raise the question whether with ‘brain processes as source’ the last word has been said. Moreover, I want to listen to the ‘expressive power’ of these experiences.

Transcendent experiences and reductionism

One of the many kinds of transcendent experiences is the near-death experience (NDE). As illustration, we shall now take a closer look at this phenomenon. Having returned from a state of clinical death,¹⁰ individuals sometimes report experiences having a number of specific characteristics, only three of which shall be mentioned here.¹¹ (1) The sensation of rising out of the body and looking down upon oneself, lying on the operating table. (2) The panorama of one’s life, through which one’s life is re-lived anew. (3) An unusual and imposing encounter with a being of light. No one can dispute the transformational power of such an experience.¹²

The British researcher Susan Blackmore has presented a model to explain the near-death experience in which brain processes play a leading role.¹³ Yet, after we have studied them physicalistically and reduce them to brain processes, we must not make the foregone conclusion that such experiences have been investigated exhaustively.

The idea that brain processes produce our mental domain is physicalistic reductionism, a model in which our consciousness resembles a shadow that follows our body from birth until death. Using reduction as scientific strategy may certainly be a fruitful starting point, but it is not the same as the ‘nothing-else-than’ philosophy of physicalistic reductionism. The mapping out of neuropsychological parallel processes of near-death-experiences does not imply that such transcendent experiences should be reductionistically understood in an epistemological and ontological sense. After all, physicalistic reductionism is not the only paradigm that has proved its right to exist in modern psychology.

Research in fields like psychoneuroimmunology,¹⁴ parapsychology,¹⁵ and (auto)suggestive processes such as bio-feedback and hypnosis¹⁶ has shown us that

⁹ McClenon (1994) pp. 240–241.

¹⁰ Uncertainty surrounds the term ‘clinical dead’. Death means being dead or deceased, and dying is a process which has an irreversible outcome. Because clinical death is not understood to be real death, the term thus remains confusing (Opdebeeck (2001) p. 61).

¹¹ Various researchers have made a classification for the diverse, commonly shared elements in near-death experiences (Greyson (2001) pp. 317–318).

¹² Such experiences are not positive by definition. Negative near-death experiences also occur (Blackmore (1993) pp. 98–106; Greyson & Evans Bush (1992) pp. 95–110 42). The near-death experience is universal, although researchers do not agree upon an interpretation. Should it be explained from the standpoint of psychological defense mechanisms or neuropsychology? Or does such an experience belong to the realm of mysticism? The public is particularly concerned with the thought that it points to life after death. Many individuals who have had near-death experiences themselves, as well as psychotherapists, are interested in the therapeutic value of the after-effects (Blackmore (1993) pp. 244–259, 263; Greyson (2001) p. 345; Opdebeeck (2001) pp. 139–311).

¹³ “The dying brain hypothesis, for all its shortcomings, does a better job of accounting for the experiences themselves.” (Blackmore (1993) p. 263).

¹⁴ Lloyd (1990) pp. 159–168; Solomon (1990) pp. 182–197.

¹⁵ Radin (1997) passim.

¹⁶ Solomon (1990) p. 194; Lynch (1990) p. 72.

consciousness may also be seen as a causal factor, which can cause the physiology of the human body ‘to follow’. Thus, with respect to transcendent experiences, there are neuropsychologists who caution against taking the physicalistic–reductionistic view as the only possible point of departure.¹⁷

Not reductionism but pluralism

In the discussion ‘reductionism versus pluralism’, the central point in question is whether the entire scientific community forms a unity, in which complex systems can be reduced to more simple systems, or whether this presupposed unity is questionable.¹⁸ A clarifying answer to this question is given by Van Dongen when he writes about the possibility of using the concept ‘incommensurability’.¹⁹ This term contains the Latin word ‘mensura’ which literally means ‘measure’ or ‘standard’ and refers to each value, each criterion or concept used to evaluate something, just like a paradigm. Thus, the term ‘incommensurability’ means ‘having no common measure’. Two areas of investigation are incommensurable when the conceptualisation of knowledge in one domain cannot be used in the other domain, and vice versa.²⁰ With our goal in mind, this implies the following: the phenomenology of near-death-experiences operates within a special domain with its own concepts. Its achievements cannot be reduced to neurophysiological concepts without violating the concepts expressing subjective experiences.²¹ Therefore it is advisable that one choose a multiform field of action, consisting of complementary approaches, and view near-death-experiences using a variety of models of inquiry. Such models²² may be derived from biology, in-depth psychology, psychology of religion, neurophysiology, or even physics.²³ Used together, such complementary approaches may outline a provisional picture, in which the possibility remains open that near-death-experiences cannot merely be reduced to brain processes but that they comprises a non-reductionistic ‘ontological moment’.

Mesmerism, spiritualism, theosophy and transcendent experiences

In recent history, philosophers have investigated transcendent experiences based on their ontological and epistemological meaning. During the 18th century, a key figure in this field was Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) who took his doctoral degree on a study about ‘animal magnetism’.²⁴ According to Mesmer, by analogy with mineral magnetism, one can speak of magnetic action between individuals, although without physical contact, that can have a healing effect in case of illness. During the process of magnetisation, which captured the minds of the French during Mesmer’s own lifetime, patients had transcendent experiences during which unknown talents and powers appeared to be activated. Illiterate patients could

¹⁷ Greyson (2001) p. 337) cited various neuropsychologists (Jansen (1997) p. 94; Jourdan (1994) p. 198; Persinger (1989) pp. 237–238) who, regarding the interpretation of near-death experiences, have warned against reductionism.

¹⁸ Titles such as *Consilience. The Unity of Knowledge* (Wilson, 1998), on one hand, and *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Dupré, 1993), on the other hand, mirror this discussion.

¹⁹ Van Dongen (1999).

²⁰ Van Dongen (1999) pp. 9–14.

²¹ Van Dongen (1999) pp. 111–117; Dupré (1993) p. 166; Madell (2002) pp.16–32.

²² Van Dongen (1999) pp. 157–172.

²³ Hamerhof (2001).

²⁴ Mesmer (1766); Darnton (1988); Ellenberger (1970) pp. 53–102; Gerding (1991); Hanegraaff (1998) pp. 430–442; Tenhaeff (1980) pp. 21–26; Vijselaar (1989); Ward (1989a) pp. 125–139.

suddenly deliver particularly well-wrought speeches, make medical diagnoses, prescribe therapies, and even practice mindreading.²⁵ Mesmer's magnetism, which evoked a trance state, contributed to the rediscovery of hypnosis²⁶ and thereafter to the psychology of the unconscious.²⁷

Magnetisation also overtook Germany and, in the 19th century, chairs for 'Mesmerism' were established at the universities of Berlin and Bonn.²⁸ Philosophers such as Baader, Schelling, G. von Schubert, Fichte and Schopenhauer and the theologians Strauss and Schleiermacher attended with interest meetings where the powers of magnetised persons were demonstrated.²⁹ They saw in the artificially induced altered states of consciousness an opportunity for the human mind to come into contact with what in those days was called the 'world soul'.³⁰

In the mid-19th century, the United States and Europe fell under the spell of spiritualism: i.e., communicating with the dead. Magnetisation was used by spiritualists to deepen the trance state of mediums and thus facilitate contact with the deceased.³¹ Interest in spiritualism pervaded all layers of society and was extensive enough that a newspaper referred to it as an epidemic.³²

It was in that climate that Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) founded the Theosophical Society in 1875,³³ in which many occult and esoteric movements of the day were united. Through, among other things, the transcendent experiences of Blavatsky, in which she claimed to have spiritual contact with non-physical 'masters', texts came into being. They became a source of inspiration for the theosophical movement.³⁴

²⁵ Ellenberger (1970) pp. 70–73. In his dissertation on spiritualistic seances, Jung also pointed out that while in a trance state a medium had a "heightened unconscious performance that transcends her normal intelligence" Jung (1902) p. 87, line 148.

²⁶ One should speak of a 're-discovery' because during antiquity, in India, Egypt and Greece, trance states were used during ritual healing. Even eye fixation was employed to arouse a state of trance (Cladder (1990) p. 14; Edmunds (1972) pp. 1,2).

²⁷ *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (Ellenberger, 1970) is a monumental standard work in this area which describes this process, including many references to primary sources. In 1829, the German doctor Justinus Kerner (1786–1862) caused quite a stir with a book about his famous patient Frederike Hauffe. After she had been magnetized by Kerner, she became extraordinarily 'awake' and her mediumship qualities extended into the realm of the spirit world where she communicated with spirits and the deceased. Kerner notated the clinical observations made by both himself and other guests. His book, *Die Seherin von Prevest*, written about Frederike Hauffe became a best seller that was reprinted a number of times (Kerner, 1829). Historians consider this book to be the first study on the latent abilities of an individual patient and a milestone in the history of psychiatry.

²⁸ Ellenberger (1970) pp. 67–77.

²⁹ Ellenberger (1970) pp. 81, 159.

³⁰ In the case of Schopenhauer, this was the 'will' (see the title of his major work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*).

³¹ Noll (1997) p. 63.

³² In 1854 a French newspaper printed that "... from the North Sea to the blue Danube, the whole of Germany has been seized by the American epidemic." In 1889 during an international congress for spiritualists in Paris, 88 newspapers represented a total of 14 million spiritualists (Tenhaeff (1971) pp. 21, 22).

³³ Theosophy (Gr. *theos*=God, *sofia*=wisdom) is a mystical doctrine in which authority is derived, by means of witnessing inner experiences, regarding the purpose of the godhead and secrets of life. In theosophy, the paranormal is accepted but is not the core tenet. At the height of its popularity (around the turn of the century, from the late 19th century), the theosophic movement had millions of sympathizers (Noll (1997) pp. 65, 67).

³⁴ Although texts can inspire, theosophy must certainly be seen as a practice rather than a dogmatic set of doctrines (Van Egmond (1982) p. 99–101). The meaning of 'transcendent experience' in theosophy shows its clear connection with Eastern philosophy. Theosophy wants to correct any misconceptions in spiritualism and dogmatic Christianity and also broaden the borders of science (Godwin (1994) pp. 277–306; Hanegraaff (1998) pp. 449–462). It became a worldwide movement with followers from both cultural and political arenas such as: Piet Mondriaan, De Bazel, William B. Yeats, Lord Tennyson, Rudolf Steiner, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Edison, George R.S. Mead.

Mesmerism, spiritualism, and theosophy are, each in their own way, associated with transcendent experiences, to which – in an ideological sense – ‘powers of expression’ are imputed.³⁵

A tennis shoe, a fire and an inkpot

In search of solid ground in this domain, a number of philosophers and scientists of different signature have given special attention to a particular subcategory of events that may occur and can be grouped together under ‘transcendent experiences’. What makes this subcategory especially attractive is that it contains an element that can be verified.³⁶

To discuss this further, let us return to Susan Blackmore, who sees an explanation for near-death experiences in brain processes. She too is seeking that special subcategory for which she gives an example. During a near-death experience, a patient had the sensation of being outside her own body. While in that state, she saw a tennis shoe, the details of which she could describe distinctively, lying on a ledge outside the hospital. Later the tennis shoe was actually found there.³⁷ Blackmore would be prepared to reject her entire theory, i.e., that near-death-experiences can be reduced to brain processes, should someone make a verifiably correct observation during a near-death-experience, not based upon the (known) reaches of the sensory organs. And, she adds, not only her own theory but also many other hypotheses in psychology, physics and biology must then be rejected.³⁸ It is understandable that just one worn-out tennis shoe is insufficient reason for Blackmore to appeal to other sciences to revolt. Therefore, it is interesting to follow philosophers and scientists who have gone in search of equivalents to this worn-out tennis shoe.

Again we return to the mid-18th century, this time to the transcendent experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who wrote a book about these experiences.³⁹ Swedenborg went through a religious crisis, after which he could make contact with angels and spirits. Among other things, he wrote that he was “... dissociated from his body ... and (then) does not know whether one is inside or outside the body ...”.⁴⁰ Now that he could speak with angels and spirits, he devoted the remainder of his life to putting the insights he received into writing. With regard to Swedenborg, Kant took a stance that nowadays, in the 21st century, may still be regarded as carefully thought out and practical. He had an eye for the philosophical implications of the questions involved here and wrote that it was of great importance even when only one case of contact with the spirit world

³⁵ The meaning and scope of Mesner’s work, i.e., spiritualism and theosophy, has been researched in various studies for the implications it has had for the cultural climate of the Western world (Barnard (2001) pp. 299–304; Godwin (1994); Hanegraaff (1998) pp. 411–462).

³⁶ Grof (1988) pp. 160–164.

³⁷ Blackmore (1993, pp. 127–128). Here we are referring to a ledge on the third floor, and the patient was admitted during the night. This is mentioned to show that there was no plausible possibility that the patient’s observation of the tennis shoe during a state of clinical death could be based on remembrance of something seen earlier by normal sensory organs.

³⁸ Blackmore (1993, p. 262). Those concepts must only be tossed overboard for someone who has unity of science in the back of the mind and wants an umbrella theory that covers all facts. Apart from this problem, it is good to point out that, in biology and physics, there are concepts which do offer room for the phenomena of which we are speaking here (Bierman et al. (1991); Costa de Beauregard (1984); Hamerhoff (2001); Josephson and Pallikari-Viras (1991); Sheldrake (1981) pp. 28–29, 201, 203; Walker (1974, 1975, 1984).

³⁹ Kant, 1766

⁴⁰ Swedenborg (1756, lines 1882–1885). Just like in literature on hypnosis, such double consciousness can be found in literature on out-of-body experiences. Individuals are conscious of being where their bodies are located while yet experiencing being elsewhere outside of the body.

could actually be proven.⁴¹ Subsequently, he stated that contact with the spirit world could not be excluded on logical grounds and that some statements made by mediums belonged to that special subcategory of verifiable phenomena.⁴²

One well-known example subsequently given by Kant was the fire in Stockholm, seen by Swedenborg in a vision in the presence of several witnesses. Swedenborg had this vision while in Göttenborg, 470 km distant from the fire. Kant had someone he trusted verify all the facts on the spot. They were all confirmed. Thus, in Kant's eyes, the vision, which corresponded incredibly well to the facts of the fire, that Swedenborg had had was true.⁴³

After this confirmation, it must be acknowledged that, for Kant, one true spirit story actually existed and that man can evidently be sensitive to influences from the spirit world.⁴⁴ Even though seeing spirits is, according to Kant, associated with psychopathology⁴⁵ – and we should be well advised to avoid such practices⁴⁶ – yet, in his opinion, the possibility that influences from the spirit world may be interwoven in the imaginations of man⁴⁷ is placed in a special light after it appears that he too has become convinced of the reality of such influences.⁴⁸

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), just like Kant, had also taken into account the verifiable subcategory of transcendent experiences. He mentioned an event which he himself had witnessed. He had wanted to dry the ink on a letter by sprinkling castor sand over it. However, he took the wrong container and instead poured ink over the letter, which dripped off the paper onto the floor. He summoned his domestic help to clean the ink from the floor as quickly as possible. While she was busy doing this, she related to Schopenhauer that she had dreamt the previous night that she must clean ink from the floor and that upon awaking she had told the other maid about her dream. Just then the other maid entered the room. Schopenhauer immediately approached her to ask what the first maid had dreamt about that night. She confirmed the dream.⁴⁹

According to Schopenhauer, here we are talking about the direct action of the will through what he called the 'dream-organ'.⁵⁰ Such information is not received by way of the sense organs but rather through the dream-organ.⁵¹ Herein Schopenhauer considered the will

⁴¹ Kant (1766) A5.

⁴² Kant (1766) A84–A85, A113–A114.

⁴³ This is made plausible in Kant's letter to Charlotte von Knobloch (Kant (1970) [1763] letter 11), and in sections of Chapter 1 (Part II) in *Träume* where Kant describes Swedenborg's vision of the fire. The chapter is entitled "Eine Erzählung deren Wahrheit der beliebigen Erkundigung des Lesers empfohlen wird (A82)". A relevant passage is also found earlier in *Trume* (A53–A57). Nevertheless, many misunderstandings may occur when reading that chapter (Gerding (1993) pp. 114–124).

⁴⁴ Gerding (1993, pp. 91–113). Whoever reads the letter to Charlotte von Knobloch and *Trume eines Geistersehers* – from Kant's point of view that influences from the world of spirits can reach man and be determined, provided that they can be verified and therefore pertain to earthly affairs – will not find Kant protesting. The later *a priori* rejection of the possibility of anomalous correspondence in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (B270, pp. 789–802) is, I believe, neither convincing (Gerding (1993) pp. 156–169) nor necessary (Gerding (1993) 185–189).

⁴⁵ Kant (1766) A71–A73.

⁴⁶ Kant (1766) A53, A128.

⁴⁷ Kant (1766) A50–A56.

⁴⁸ Gerding (1993) pp. 146–148.

⁴⁹ Schopenhauer (1851, p. 306). Schopenhauer also reports an experience in which he himself received the impressions. A landlady asked him which three numbers were on a lot which she had bought. He 'guessed' the first two numbers correctly whereafter having become "... durch ihren Jubel stutzig" he missed the third number (Schopenhauer (1851) pp. 366–367). He thought that for these visions it was all about a form of observation that "... unser Interesse erregt" when it is a matter of "... Beziehung derselben auf etwas empirisch Objektives" (Schopenhauer (1851) p. 358).

⁵⁰ Schopenhauer (1851) pp. 336–376.

⁵¹ Schopenhauer (1851) p. 336.

to be functioning under the surface. He considered these phenomena the most important empirical facts that could befall a philosopher.⁵² It is an example of ‘practical metaphysics’, which he saw as an empirical confirmation of his position as philosopher.⁵³

Transcendent experiences in science and philosophy during the past century

Towards the end of the 19th century, scientific research on transcendent experiences received a modest impulse through the foundation of ‘Societies for Psychical Research’, first in England and later in the USA and several European countries. These institutions still exist, and, the researchers associated with them, in their orientation towards transcendent experiences, still place special attention on the subcategory – verifiable events – also brought to the foreground by Kant and Schopenhauer.

The English Society for Psychical Research was first to take up such research. That the academic world was interested is evident through the fact that a number of well-known scientists and philosophers were chairmen of this ‘society’. Among them were William James, William Crookes, Frederick Myers, and the Nobel Prize winners Charles Richet and Henri Bergson.⁵⁴

The ‘Nederlandse Studievereniging voor Psychical Research’ – Dutch Society for Psychical Research – was founded in 1920. The philosopher and psychologist Gerard Heymans (1857–1930) from the University of Groningen became its first chairman. In his inaugural speech, he spoke the following words “... we wish to study the relevant phenomena and investigate them scientifically and without prejudice.⁵⁵ [...] Facts prevail above theories, and it would not be the first time if, here too, a condemning verdict spoken in the name of theories over facts must later be revised.”⁵⁶ The interest that was aroused in Heymans is understandable because Heymans, like Schopenhauer, saw the phenomena investigated as empirical support for his philosophy.⁵⁷

During the second half of the 20th century, there were also philosophers and scientists who saw this verifiable subcategory of transcendent experiences as support for their own scientific and philosophical positions. The Dutch philosopher Johannes J. Poortman (1869–1970)⁵⁸ saw himself supported herein on his research on the subtle astral human body.⁵⁹ The psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) tried to understand transcendent experience through his analytical psychology.⁶⁰

⁵² Schopenhauer (1851) pp. 321–322.

⁵³ Schopenhauer (1838) pp. 423, 429–430, 442, 457; Schopenhauer (1851) p. 323.

⁵⁴ Bonin (1984) pp. 459–460; Grattan-Guinness (1982) pp. 35–36. Among them also Hans Driesch (1926–1927), Charlie D. Broad (1935–1936, 1958–1960), Alister C. Hardy (1965–1969), and John Beloff (1975).

⁵⁵ Heymans (1920) p. 2.

⁵⁶ Heymans (1920) p. 9; see also Van Dongen & Gerding (1983) pp. 31–33.

⁵⁷ In the case of Heymans, it is a question of psychical monism. He writes “...psychical monism would still be acknowledged, also with respect to its last consequences, if the results of so-called Psychical Research, especially those concerning telepathy and manifestations of dead individuals, could be proven reliable” (Heymans (1933) p. 415; see also Heymans, 1913). He acted immediately and ran an experiment on telepathy – far advanced for its time – and concluded that, under conditions in which normal sensory perception can be completely ruled out, the ability to read minds should be placed beyond all reasonable doubt (Heymans et al. (1921) p. 6; Van Dongen & Gerding (1983) pp. 32–38).

⁵⁸ Prof. Dr. J.J. Poortman (1958–1966) was the first to hold the Proklos Foundation chair. He was succeeded by Prof. Dr. J.H. Dubbink (1966–1975) and Prof. Dr. W.H. van Vledder (1979–2000), respectively. In the interim period, Drs. E. Verwaal (1975–1979) took over (Dubbink (1982) pp. 104–105; Van Vledder (2000) pp. 3, 5).

⁵⁹ Poortman (1967) pp. 459–587; Van Dongen & Gerding (1993) pp. 164–205.

⁶⁰ Jung, 1952; Gerding, 2004.

In summary: In transcendent experiences, one can find a subcategory of verifiable incidents that various philosophers and scientists have considered such experiences meaningful ‘key events’ which hold significance for philosophical and scientific points of view.⁶¹

Scientific research on anomalous correspondence

For at least eighty years now, the events that convinced Kant and Schopenhauer no longer have value as evidence. Even if your name is Kant or Schopenhauer, no one listens when you say that you witnessed it yourself or were informed by a reliable source. The mental climate has changed, and spontaneous cases no longer prove satisfying. It is a different story when scientific laboratories can produce such events. Therefore it is not surprising that there has been much debate around the results of such investigations, particularly because of their implications for science and philosophy.⁶² Of course, a central point in this discussion is the question how empirically real is the subcategory of transcendent experiences that so impressed philosophers such as Kant and Schopenhauer. Evidently, it seems possible that the experiential content of such experiences can correspond in some incomprehensible way to something occurring in the external world.

The phrase ‘extrasensory perception’ applies in cases of mental or physiological events that correspond in an incomprehensible way to something taking place outside the reach of our normal perception. The term ‘psychokinesis’ is used in cases of incomprehensible physical events that are possibly related to (subconscious) intentions. I would suggest that in what follows we group these two terms together and speak of ‘anomalous correspondence’.

Scientific laboratory research on anomalous correspondence is still being carried out today. It is with restraint that I say the following. It would be appropriate to doubt the reality of anomalous correspondence were there no reliable indications to satisfy modern requirements for scientific proof. However, such indications can be found in rigidly reviewed, international, mainstream psychology,⁶³ physics,⁶⁴ statistics⁶⁵ and neuroscience⁶⁶ journals. Obviously, statistically significant results from empirical research in the field of anomalous correspondence are taken seriously.⁶⁷ Scientists who do this type research reflect upon the meaning of their results. One such important scientist is the American Dean Radin, who wrote that anomalous correspondence is about ‘...our experiencing unseen interconnectedness...’ as a binding factor in the universe and has further argued that anomalous correspondence ‘...is at the core of new metaphysical foundations of science...’ by which we are interconnected with ‘...holistic realms previously only described by mystics and mythology.’⁶⁸

⁶¹ This point has been explicitly formulated by way of propositions by C.D. Broad (1969, pp. 8–12; 1987). The relationship between parapsychology, on one hand, and science and philosophy, on the other hand, has been discussed by, e.g., Braude (1997, pp. 255–276), Van Dongen (1999, pp. 127–155), Flew (1987), Griffin (1997, pp. 269–292), and Steinkamp (2002).

⁶² A good example of such a discussion is the debate on meta-analyses of parapsychology research according to the Ganzfeld method (Palmer (2003) pp. 51–68).

⁶³ *Psychological Bulletin* (Bem & Honorton, 1994).

⁶⁴ *Foundation of Physics* (Radin & Nelson, 1989).

⁶⁵ *Statistical Science* (Utts, 1991).

⁶⁶ *Neuroscience Letters* (Wackermann et al., 2003).

⁶⁷ Interestingly, the effect sizes found are of the same magnitude as those for break-throughs in medical research (Schlitz & Braud (2003) p. 226). Research on anomalous correspondence is not primarily directed towards existential proof. In a large database containing decades of experiments, Spottiswoode (1997) and Bierman (2000) have found patterns which may have implications for future research.

⁶⁸ Radin (1997) p. 273.

All in all, reflecting on the expressive power of transcendent experiences will direct our attention to experimental scientific data concerning anomalous correspondence. If these data make anomalous correspondence credible, then the following question arises. Should we take into consideration that aspects of certain anomalous experiences make it possible to comprehend, from the here and now, what can be called transcendent? I am aware that this remark must be formulated as a question and an assignment. However I want to add that this assignment actually lies before us. We have to deal with the question what the prospect is regarding the researchability of transcendence. Within the domain of this chair, this question will certainly be asked because scientific inquiry into latent human powers is one of the planks in the platform of theosophy. For philosophers and scientists, anomalous experiences offer a challenge because of their implications.⁶⁹ However, what have non-philosophers and non-scientists to do with anomalous experiences? Why do they not – spiritually speaking – stay at home and work in the garden, as Kant recommended.⁷⁰

Demographic research into transcendent experiences

Transcendent experiences may also simply announce themselves by chance and do not appear to be reserved for mystics, artists, creative scientists or philosophers only. Results of demographic research have taught us that such experiences occur on a large scale. Between 35% and 50% of the population in Australia, Great Britain and the USA claim to have had a transcendent experience at some time.⁷¹ Between 15% and 20% of the populations in English-speaking countries claim to have had an out-of-body experience.⁷²

From time immemorial, the church was the institute that channelled one's dealing with transcendent experiences. However, the populace in The Netherlands has become non-churchgoers: while 50% were churchless in 1980, this figure has risen to 63% in 1999.⁷³ The popular view that these data point to a progressive disenchantment in our society does not hold, for belief in life after death has risen from 53% in 1991 to 60% in 1998. Belief in religious miracles has risen from 32% in 1991 to 40% in 1998.⁷⁴ We see this daily, for example, in the popularity of movies like 'The Matrix', in the children's book series about the magic of Harry Potter, and in the massive usage of mind-expanding drugs. Transcendent experiences are the order of the day. Certain people who, intentionally or not, have transcendent experiences undergo psychological distress. A recently executed explorative study in The Netherlands among mental-health therapists indicated that people with problems regarding transcendent experiences do indeed seek help at mental-health-care centres and that although some such therapists are open to the anomalous subcategory of transcendent experiences, they do not

⁶⁹ Those implications concern questions and issues about the relationship body–mind, subject–object, and freedom–determinism (see also Braude, 1997; Flew, 1987; Grimm, 1982; Steinkamp, 2002). For this purpose philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Heymans and Poortman have considered anomalous correspondence as support for their philosophical positions. There are also studies which draw a relationship between anomalous correspondence and spirituality (Griffin, 1997; Main, 1995).

⁷⁰ Kant (1766) A128 (last sentence in the book). A similar comment was written in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant (1781) B294–B295).

⁷¹ A transcendent experience can be described as follows: to have the impression that one is in contact with something infinite, intangible, and beyond human capability. Here one refers to a number of studies carried out at different periods during the last decade (Wulf (2001) pp. 406–407; Roy (2001) p. xi).

⁷² Blackmore (1993) p. 169.

⁷³ Becker & De Wit (2000) p. 77.

⁷⁴ Becker & De Wit (2000, p. 41). For the youth, everything goes faster. Their belief in religious miracles rose from 28% in 1991 to 42% in 1998 (Becker & De Wit (2000) p. 43). Moreover, in The Netherlands, 22% of the population is certain that telepathy and clairvoyance exist, and 12% believes in reincarnation (Becker et al. (1997) p. 133).

have sufficient knowledge in this field.⁷⁵ Such reported experiences can lead to an identity crisis or to problems in finding the meaning of life or in personal inter-relationships and might be intermingled with psychopathology.⁷⁶ These are matters that deserve our special attention.

Transcendent experiences as metaphysical revelation

A number of researchers have pointed out that the expressive power of transcendent experiences can be perceived as being a natural and authentic authority.⁷⁷ I hasten to quickly add that this is not characteristic of all transcendent experiences. However, I now want to give you, by means of a single testimony, an impression of the existential and inescapable forming and transforming character of a transcendent experience. Someone described in retrospect his experience as follows:

“ ... suddenly, with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord ... I was no longer myself ... but instead was a vast circle of consciousness, in which the body was but a point bathed in light and in a state of exultation and happiness which is impossible to describe.”⁷⁸

The theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) would call this experience ‘numinous’, sacred.⁷⁹ It is the perception of a terrifying closeness of a great mystery. That experience is acquired outside the normal state of consciousness, and the American psychologist and philosopher William James reported that some individuals see this as “... a genuine metaphysical revelation”.⁸⁰ Therefore, it is not incomprehensible that some philosophers and scientists have taken it upon themselves to examine the ontological and epistemological meanings of such experiences.

Transcendent experiences and dissociation

A point to begin when studying transcendent experiences is the phenomenon ‘dissociation’, i.e., experiences or behaviours that have broken away from someone’s stream of

⁷⁵ Corbeau (2004b, pp. 10–15; (2004a) pp. 56, 57, 60). Some clients have suffered iatrogenic damage. A void exists within education for psychotherapists and thus also for psychotherapeutic practice. The recent study *The Coverage of Parapsychology in Introductory Psychology Textbooks* (McClenon et al., 2003) shows that for this problematic issue a relevant field of enquiry such as parapsychology is appears unsatisfactorily, incorrectly and distorted in text books for students of psychology. Such a situation can stimulate organizations outside the academic world to offer perspectives to people with problems in this area. In The Netherlands, the possibility to consult specialists has been available at the Institute for Parapsychology in Utrecht since the late 1970s. Information and help on near-death experiences can be obtained from the Merkawah foundation. The Society for Transpersonal Psychiatry (Vereniging voor Transpersoonlijke Psychiatrie) was recently established.

⁷⁶ Interesting studies on the relationship between transcendent experiences, spirituality, the meaning of life, and psychopathology can be found in Grof & Grof, 1989; Ward (Ed.), 1989; Krippner & Powers, 1997.

⁷⁷ Main (1995) p. 234; Grof (1988) p. 161; Otto (1979) pp. 13–37.

⁷⁸ Krippner (2000) p. 13.

⁷⁹ Otto, 1979 [1917].

⁸⁰ James (1979 [1902], p. 373). In his discussion on mystical experiences, Wulff (2001, p. 428) points to the methodological problem that when searching for experiences the researcher sometimes has difficulty maintaining a neutral position and then himself becomes convinced that the phenomena do genuinely reflect reality (see also Consemulder (2003) p. 19).

consciousness or identity.⁸¹ The most complex type of dissociation is found in the Dissociative Identity Syndrome (DIS),⁸² whereby at least two identities or personalities are repeatedly in command of someone's behaviour. In literature we can find an example of this in Stevenson's well-known book *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where two opposite identities become manifest within a single individual. In the case of dissociation, a victim of repeated physical or psychological abuse may defend himself by using mental escapism or splitting himself off from such traumatic events.⁸³ There are also less serious forms of dissociation. We all recognise the experience of the motorist who, driving along a familiar route, carries on an intense conversation with a fellow passenger but upon arrival can remember the conversation completely but almost nothing of the drive.⁸⁴ Dissociative experiences are on a sliding scale: not only between the poles 'normal' and 'pathological' but also between 'normal' and 'inspired' or 'normal' and 'ingenious'.⁸⁵ Dissociation is mental discontinuity, i.e., a shift in the stream of consciousness whether or not sought consciously.⁸⁶ We see dissociative shifts occurring during magnetisation and hypnosis, in cases of possession, trance, or spiritualistic mediumship, and in experimental research on anomalous correspondence. Dissociation appears to activate a latent power through which individuals become able to do exceptional things.⁸⁷ References to dissociative experiences can be found in philosophy, anthropology, and in psychology of religion. Socrates listened to the voice of his 'daemon', the shaman to the voices of his ancestors, and the mystic to the voices of angels. In theosophy, we also find references to dissociative experiences. Blavatsky experienced spiritual contact with masters who were not physically present.⁸⁸ Here dissociation is not 'psychopathological' but rather a 'power' to open oneself and become able to do something extraordinary. It appears that, in this way, man is able to draw from a reservoir of latent intelligence and creativity that is always obstructed by psychological and social impediments but can be surmounted through dissociation.⁸⁹ In the words of William James:

“... our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, ... there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness ... No account of the universe in its totality can be seen final which leaves these forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”

⁸¹ Krippner (1997) p. 9.

⁸² Formerly this was called the Multiple Personality Syndrome (MPS: Van der Hart, 1991).

⁸³ Hereby it frequently happens that a certain 'identity' experiences abuse while the other 'identities' do not have the same experience (Van der Hart, 1991).

⁸⁴ Braude (1995) p. 91.

⁸⁵ Grosso (1997, pp. 181–198). William James (1979, p. 29) calls someone who has had a mystical experience a 'genius'. Research in this area should not fail to take into consideration what we today call the 'idiot savant' (Treffert, 1989).

⁸⁶ Based on phenomenological analyses, Krippner (2000) differentiates between 16 types of dissociation. Krippner & Powers (1997) give a good overview of dissociation in its various functional and dysfunctional manifestations.

⁸⁷ Braude (1995) p. 95.

⁸⁸ Not only Swedenborg and Blavatsky have received lessons from beyond. At the moment, books are being sold in large numbers that have been compiled by means of channeling (being a 'channel' that receives and passes along information; Hanegraaff (1998) pp. 23–41; Klimo (1989) *passim*).

⁸⁹ Braude (1995) pp. 246–247; Braude (2002) pp. 95–97; Grosso (1997) pp. 195–198.

In the process of gathering knowledge, a philosopher should never disregard any possibility. Otto Duintjer draws attention to the limitations of identifying oneself with the rational empirical position of consciousness⁹⁰ and recommends allowing other means of experience to come into full play.⁹¹

In this way, we have returned to the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his puppet Charley who evoked in him philosophical wisdom. That puppet helped the ventriloquist to dissociate and brought him into contact with wisdom for which he could otherwise not gain access.⁹² In other words: *how* we gain knowledge can easily be decisive for *what* we learn. In the light of the above, I see scientific research in the field of transcendent experiences, coupled with philosophical reflection upon such scientific research, as a true contribution to ‘metaphysics in the spirit of theosophy’.⁹³

In closing, I would like to say the following to all those present – in particular to the students here today. In the opening words of my ‘inaugural address’ I invited you as college of auguries to come observe my maiden flight. Well, what are the implications now that this airbourne bird has landed? This means that, no matter how fascinating transcendent experiences may be from a scientific and/or philosophical point of view, we can only serve such scholarship well if we worked from the place where we actually find ourselves: i.e., with both feet planted firmly on the ground.

⁹⁰ Duintjer (1988) pp. 32, 42, 43.

⁹¹ Duintjer (1988, pp. 107–148). Charles Tart (1972) argues for ‘state-specific science’.

⁹² Stanley Krippner who draws upon this event as example of controlled contact with the ‘self’ (Krippner (2000) p. 5) differentiates between 16 types of dissociation in his study on ‘exceptional human experiences’ (Krippner (2000) pp. 3–29).

⁹³ For reading and commenting upon this inaugural address, I would like to thank Dick Bierman (University of Amsterdam, University of Utrecht), John Consemulder, Hein van Dongen (Institute of Parapsychology) and Rens Wezelman.

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