

THE ESP ENIGMA: THE SCIENTIFIC CASE FOR PSYCHIC PHENOMENA by Diane Hennacy Powell. New York: Walker, 2009. Pp. 280. \$25.00 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-0-8027-1606-4.

The inside sleeve of this book establishes the scientific credentials of author Diane Hennacy Powell: trained in medicine, neurology, and psychiatry; former member of Harvard Medical School's faculty; published articles in neuroscience and psychiatry journals. Perhaps since those early days she has become less interested in mainstream medical practice, as her website biography states she currently "has a solo practice in Medford, Oregon and incorporates psychotherapy, psychopharmacology, and pet therapy into her compassionate healing of people who want personalized care" (www.dianehennacypowell.com). She is a peace activist (it runs in the family, as she is great-niece of Ammon Hennacy) and is also active in human rights.

The brief introduction argues for taking psychic phenomena seriously—this is to be expected given the book's subtitle. Powell claims that "if one wants to prove whether or not telepathy can exist, one strong convincing case for its existence should be sufficient" (p. 5). With apologies to William James, this is a naïve claim. Although such a "white crow"

argument may be true in the so-called "hard" sciences, in research with human participants (who come into the lab with varying expectations, moods, personalities, and hangovers), and when we are dealing with phenomena that appear to have small and inconsistent effects under laboratory conditions, we have to use inferential statistics and rely on an accumulation of consistent findings to build a convincing case.

Toward the end of the introduction, Powell describes a life-changing experience when a patient claiming to be psychic told her several accurate details of her life and made predictions that (eventually) came true. This stimulated Powell's interest in the paranormal to the extent that she "decided to systematically investigate psychic phenomena" (p. 8), and it seems that she has been doing this for the past 20 years. Oddly, given her two decades of systematic research, if Powell *has* published any of her work in peer-reviewed journals, she does not reference it in her own book.

Chapter 1 ("Consciousness and the Brain") sets the context by, again briefly, introducing different philosophical models of consciousness: monism versus dualism; materialism; and the so-called "hard problem" of consciousness. The hard problem was introduced by philosopher David Chalmers (1994) and is paraphrased by Powell as "how something as nonmaterial as consciousness could arise from the brain" (p. 19). This paraphrasing makes rather more assumptions than the more prosaic phrasing more commonly associated with Chalmers: "how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience." But Powell does not explore her assumptions or indicate to the reader that the hard problem may be differently conceptualized.

Chapter 1 closes with a line of reasoning so naïve that I was left gaping: "The brain is composed of atoms and therefore the principles of quantum physics are operating in our brains" (p. 24); the same goes for all other particles in the universe, if quantum physics is correct. Powell seems unaware that different levels of explanation are appropriate for different physical systems. Most physicists do not take seriously the idea that the quantum level is the most appropriate for psychological or neuroscientific questions. Powell then makes another giant leap in the following sentence: "A model that recognizes that quantum physics also operates in our brains might explain many of consciousness's 'unsolved mysteries'" (p. 24). Because a rationale for this line of reasoning is absent from the chapter, the reader is left hoping that all will be revealed in subsequent chapters.

Next, a large chunk of the book consists of six chapters providing a selective review of the parapsychological literature: telepathy, identical twins and "coupled consciousness," clairvoyance, precognition, PK, and OBEs. Most of these chapters follow the same basic format, with an initial description of anecdotal and historical material, followed by an account of some more recent laboratory research that supports the general argument of the book (that psychic phenomena are genuine). Readers of this journal

will already be quite familiar with the ground that is covered in these chapters, so I won't tread on it again.

The final part of the book sees Powell ambitiously developing a "new theory of consciousness" based on her understanding of quantum physics, of the nature of psychic phenomena, and of the (assumed) nonmaterial nature of consciousness. This latter assumption pervades the entire book, and reveals in my view a misidentification of "subjective experience" with "nonmaterial."

Despite her previous life in medicine, neurology, and psychiatry, Powell doesn't seem to have consulted the modern-day psychological and neuroscience literature on consciousness. No reference is made to the models of consciousness that prevail in this literature. Roughly put, these models arise out of research suggesting that subjective experience gives the misleading impression of a "self" that is making conscious decisions, and that neural activity *precedes* our subjective experiences. Benjamin Libet's (1985) seminal paper entitled "Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action" (the first three words of the title give it away) is not mentioned by Powell. Likewise for Daniel Wegner's (2002) hugely influential book *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (again, the title gives it away). For those readers who would like to acquaint themselves with this literature, Sue Blackmore's (2010) textbook is an accessible and comprehensive source (and includes chapters on the paranormal and exceptional human experience). This extensive literature builds an empirically derived model of consciousness that undermines the basic assumptions of Powell's work.

To end this review on a more positive note, when Powell covers territory with which she is presumably more familiar, I found her ideas more interesting and insightful. For instance, in the chapter on OBEs, she proposes a role for the angular gyrus and the temporal lobe in accessing psychic information via an OBE. This proposal is based on her recalling an MRI paper describing how, for schizophrenic subjects, the angular gyrus was larger on the right hemisphere than on the left. As Powell states: "Since 42 percent of people with schizophrenia report OBEs, an abnormality of the angular gyrus may be the reason schizophrenia and OBEs commonly occur together" (p. 114). As the angular gyrus is also implicated with dreams, Powell proposes that "heightened activity in the angular gyrus may cause OBEs, which may be 'waking dreams'" (p. 116). This, she observes, would align with suggestions made by lucid dream expert Stephen LaBerge.

Some readers may be disappointed that little consideration is given in *The ESP Enigma* to alternative interpretations of the literature, or unsupportive findings. However, readers whose minds are already made up on the topic will find that their ideological feathers remain pleasingly unruffled.

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