

Letters

Parapsychology Not Guilty

Under the heading "A pseudo experience in parapsychology" (Letters, 18 June, p. 1541), Luis W. Alvarez tells of a coincidental experience. He ends his account by saying that such coincidences "are reported in the parapsychological literature as proof of extrasensory perception. . . ."

I have long been working with extrasensory perception and with the general field of parapsychology, and on the basis of my knowledge and experience I can assure Alvarez that no serious worker in this field would ever think of his type of coincidence as in any way parapsychological. His case involved the unusual coincidence of finding two similar names in the same newspaper. Parapsychology deals with a type of communication between person and environment not mediated by the sensorimotor system. It is concerned with coincidence and probability theory only in the same way that any other branch of natural science must be.

There is another aspect to the misunderstandings in the letter. In my 40 years of work in parapsychology I have not come upon any attempt to base a serious conclusion upon spontaneous case material even when such material does belong to the parapsychological category, as that cited by Alvarez does not.

If Alvarez or anyone else wishes to become acquainted with the parapsychological literature to which he refers, a request for a reference list will be promptly filled.

J. B. RHINE

*Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man, College Station,
Durham, North Carolina*

The letter by Alvarez is a variation on a theme which should be frequently repeated to the swelling audience of overeager followers of the popular parapsychological literature. Essentially, the point is that the *statistically im-*

probable, with a sufficient number of cases, can also be the *frequently observed*. The Sunday supplements abound in such improbable coincidences as the one cited by Alvarez, coincidences whose frequency of occurrence he estimates at approximately 3000 per year in the population of adult Americans.

Unfortunately, the figures he gives cannot be directly applied to the so-called "spontaneous cases" most frequently cited by the more serious parapsychologists. These cases do not fit the relatively simple model he entertains, yet they are the core of most serious arguments in favor of extrasensory perception. In general, these cases concern coincidences of a much more specific nature—for example, the thought of a known person's *death* in a 5-minute period just before learning of that person's death, or (perhaps more typically) the thought of a known person's *death at a particular time by a particular agent* just before learning of that person's death at that time by that agent. Clearly, such coincidences are much less probable than the simple "recollection of a known person in a 5-minute period just before learning of that person's death." Thus, such events should occur much less frequently than the events specified in Alvarez's model. In the absence of specific probabilities on this more specific level, one's impression is that the actual frequency of such "spontaneous cases" is many times greater than even a liberal frequency estimate using the Alvarez figures as a base from which to proceed.

Thus, while Alvarez has offered a solid rejoinder to the popular press, he has not offered information relevant to the evaluation of the source of the issue: the more serious parapsychological literature. It would appear that the latter information would be the more appropriate and worthwhile for the inquiring scientist.

CHARLES G. MORRIS

*406 West Clark Street,
Champaign, Illinois*

Alvarez's reduction of some "evidence" for extrasensory perception to impression by positive coincidences invites the reduction of some further "evidence" to the overlooking of negative instances.

When I was a young instructor I awoke in the small hours one morning with a feeling which I had never had before and have never had since: a compelling feeling that something terrible had happened at my parental home. Habitually skeptical about such things, I resolved to record this experience carefully and check it with whatever the reality might prove to be. With that resolution formed but not carried out, I turned over and went to sleep. Upon waking, I was too preoccupied with my teaching to think of the "revealing" experience, and did not think of it again until, within a week, a student asked: "What about those feelings you get that something bad has happened at home, and then you get a message that it has happened?" This reminded me suddenly of my vivid experience and faint resolution, which otherwise I suspect I would have forgotten completely. Thus I was able to cite the experience together with the news, which had come meanwhile, that all was as usual at home.

W. S. TAYLOR

*27 Langworthy Road,
Northampton, Massachusetts*

What Professors Are For

The sound remarks in Abelson's "What are professors for?" (18 June, p. 1545) suggest another question: What do professors get? Abelson is correctly sensitive to the fact that students are increasingly deprived of human contact by changes in the techniques and the social conditions of modern higher education. What needs to be understood as well is that recent trends are depriving professors of the satisfactions which teaching should bring. The losses are mutual because the pleasures of teacher and student are mutual and interdependent: the growth in the mind and the powers of the student must be visible to the teacher, the pleasure of the teacher upon seeing this development must be visible to the student, and so on.

As such shared experiences become rarer in American colleges and universities, the students are the first to complain, because they are more re-