Philosophy and the Paranormal

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Peter Forrest: Scientists have discovered many truths. But have they discovered 100% of all truths? Surely not. Even 50%? Who knows? Perhaps there is far more out there than has already been discovered. This evening Arcady will present us with a paranormal phenomenon. Then we shall start discussing it and you will, we sincerely hope, join in the discussion.

Arcady Blinov: It was late at night that the Russian scientist Mikailo Lomonosov felt suddenly that something disastrous was happening to his father right now. Lomonosov's father was a fisherman and Lomonosov as a boy frequently joined him in his adventures fishing out into the Northern Sea, but that autumn night the father and the son were separated by the distance of 2000 miles. Still Mikailo was distinctly visioning the details of the disaster that his father was experiencing amidst the stormy sea. His boat had run up on the rocks of a treacherous small island and his father and his men were desperately struggling for survival against the salty waves.

When in a month or so (it was the 18th century and communications were pretty slow) a man from the Lomonosov's village knocked on the door of Mikailo's house in Moscow to tell him the sad news that Vasilai Lomonosov, his father, had perished in the stormy sea, Mikailo was quite prepared and to the messenger's amazement he was able to tell back some minor details of the disaster that could be known only to the participants. How come?

Let me just list some possible reactions to this story.

- **Reaction 1**: It is a miracle. That is something supernatural that happened perhaps due to the intervention of a deity - a supreme being.
- **Reaction 2**: It is a sheer coincidence.
- **Reaction 3**: It is a lucky guess. That you've guessed about your father's death might be called lucky. A correct guess that is, made out of the basis of some subconscious contextual proofs.
- **Reaction 4**: It is an unmistakable case of telepathy or perhaps clairvoyance.
- **Reaction 5**: The whole story just is not true. It is a sort of legend that is touching but obviously false.

While the reactions are incompatible, there are at least some of them that are so. For

example, if Lamonosov's vision just happened to coincide by sheer chance with what was happening to his father, then obviously it could not be a case of telepathy. Thus only one from the five reactions can be possibly correct. Suppose I want to have the right opinion about the whole story, how am I to choose among the five reactions. This is where we come close to matters philosophical.

To philosophise is to build interesting arguments about general issues. Now, one path from Lamonosov's case to the general issues that would be of interest to a philosopher is this. One possible interpretation of Lamonosov's case is that it is an instance of telepathy. Telepathy is a psi phenomenon. Psi phenomena are the subject of parapsychology. Parapsychology is a branch of the paranormal research, and one exciting philosophical question about paranormal research is how paranormal research relates to science.

Science is usually thought to be a great justifier of our beliefs. Thus perhaps we are supposed to accept whatever judgements science has to pass on Lamonosov's case if we want to be on the right side. If science says that the telepathy interpretation is nonsense, then we should reject the telepathy interpretation and concentrate instead on some other explanations. But a rather subtle problem seems to arise here. When we want science to pronounce judgement on some issue or other, we usually appeal to the corresponding branch of science. Thus, if we have questions about electricity, we are supposed to appeal for answers to physics. With questions on living organisms we go to biology and so on. So with our question as to whether Lamonosov's case is an instance of telepathy or not, is not it parapsychology were we are to go to? At this what I seem to hear is indignant voices of scientists. They are saying 'That's not right. Parapsychology is not science'. Well perhaps they're right, but how are we to tell? Is there a litmus paper with which we could use to tell science from non-science?

'Yes!' is what scientists and many philosophers would answer. The distinctive feature of science is its method. Science proceeds in a special way. It aims at general theories and it achieves them on the basis of observed facts. But look, one can gather one billion facts by way of observations and experiments, but still this stupendous collection of facts would be finite. At lot of relevant facts would still remain outside the collection. One cannot hope to observe all relevant facts, because the number of all relevant facts is not one billion or ten billion - it is infinite.

On the other hand, any general theory claims to cover all relevant facts. That is, the infinity of them. How then can science make this leap from one billion facts that are observed to the infinity of facts that are covered by a general theory? This is a crucial question and the answer which will come from the same scientific and philosophical quarters will be this: the leap that you have in mind is allowed for by special principle which lies at the very heart of science. It is the principal of induction. It runs as follows:

If one has gathered a really large collection of observed facts; if the facts in the collection display the same pattern under a really wide variety of circumstances; and finally, if no one from the observed facts deviates from the above pattern, then one is allowed to promote that pattern to the rank of a universal law.

One is allowed out of that to move from a finite collection of observed facts to the corresponding general theory that covers the infinity of relevant facts, and furthermore, this principle of induction, which is the most characteristic feature of science can serve as a litmus paper to tell genuine science from non-science. For example, most theories of physics do pass the test for a good inductive generalisation. Whereas, parapsychology would definitely fail the test, because presumably in parapsychology there has not been gathered such a pool of observations that, first, would exhibit an interesting uniform pattern; second, the pattern would be invariant under a wide enough variety of conditions; third, there would be no one observation that conflicts with the pattern. Thus, the defenders of inductive science would conclude 'parapsychology is not genuine science, at least not for the time beings', and 'if you want a scientific explanation of Lomonosov's case, you had better go somewhere else - perhaps social psychology that would provide you with an account of 'how' and 'why' some blatantly false beliefs can be turned into widely accepted superstitions'.

So far so good. If the defenders of inductive science are right and of course, they have simplified their story for expository purposes, then so much the worse for parapsychology. But, are they really right?. You recall that the basis of scientific method on their account is the principle of induction. In fact, that principle is supposed to constitute the foundation on which the whole edifice of science is built. The principle of induction supports the whole of science, but what supports the principle of induction?

If that principle is part of science, then presumably it must have the status of general of theory, but we've heard a minute ago that in science, no general theory can be achieved without using the principles of induction. It seems then that we have in the first place, to already have the principle of induction expanded, as an indispensable tool before we can hope to achieve the same principle as a legitimate part of science. The whole procedure then seems circular and dubious. The other procedure would be to keep the principle of science out of science itself, but in this case it would occur that the whole edifice of science is set on unscientific foundation. This two-horned predicament constitutes the notorious problem of induction.

Now, to conclude, let me say that historically, all that I have time enough to tell you about today is only the first episode in that intellectually fascinating serial which is called 'philosophy of science'.

Peter Forrest: I'd like to come in here - it's Peter again - and take up one of Arcady's points. We all use induction, but it's boring. For instance, we have plenty of crisp sunny weather here winter after winter, so we predict that we should go on having crisp sunny winters. And that's reasonable, but it's not exciting science. Really exciting science, like the Big Bang, which started it all, are not based on induction. Look, it's not as if we look at universe after universe and then say with a yawn 'Well, all the other universes started with Big Bangs so probably that little old universe there did too'. We've only got one case to go on and we don't use induction to come to believe in the Big Bang. For interesting science, I'd say we need something else. We need what I call 'inference to the best explanation'. You look at as many hypotheses as you could think of, looking clearly at both the stodgy conservative ones and the wild

and woolly ones. Put them all in, then see which best explains the phenomenon. Now, in the case of Lomonosov, I would like to go over the five reactions mentioned by Arcady and think of them as hypotheses. The scientific thing, I say, is to pick the one the one that best explains.

- **Reaction 1**: That was the hypothesis that it's a miracle - there's a deity. A supreme being intervened. Well, I believe in God, but I doubt if She would intervene miraculously in that case. For a start, what good did it do? If we're talking about miracles at Lourdes or something, I would take the miraculous as a serious hypothesis - I'd put it on the list, but not in this case, so let's just cross it off.
- **Reaction 2**: That tells us it's sheer coincidence. That I'd say is just a lazy hypothesis. Of course, it might be coincidence, but then maybe all the data which supports evolution is just coincidence. Maybe all the circumstantial evidence used to convict the backpacker murderer was just coincidence. We can always appeal to coincidence, and because it's such a lazy hypothesis we can always appeal to, I'm reluctant to resort to it.
- **Reaction 3**: The lucky guess. Well, this one I take seriously. I actually think it's how astrologers and crystal ball gazers work. Here's how I see it: we are inundated with information from all sources. We can't analyse it in a clear way, but we do often make astoundingly good inferences in an intuitive unconscious way from this mass of information. So perhaps Lomonosov was recalling many fishing trips at just that time of year, which he knew were dangerous. And his intuitive idea, presented to him visually, was that this time it would be fatal. Suppose he was remembering all those past fishing trips in winter, on a rocky shore, and he really had each time, a 10 percent chance of disaster, that if that was all he was thinking of, there was a 10 percent chance that this time it would be disastrous. So we shouldn't be surprised. Let's look at reaction no. 4.
- **Reaction 4**: That's the hypothesis that it's telepathy or clairvoyance. Well, I don't think that's a hypothesis at all until we have some theory of telepathy or clairvoyance. It's not a hypothesis - it's just a name for what's going on.
- **Reaction 5**: The whole story, it said, is not true. Again, I think that's a lazy hypothesis like the coincidence one, but here I'd like to say about it and the coincidence explanation, that many scientists have kicked themselves for lazily dismissing some phenomenon as just so much noise or coincidence, to find their colleagues win fame investigating it. An example that comes to mind is Brownian motion. All sorts of scientist have seen under the microscope little specs of dust dancing around in an irregular way, and they've all said to themselves 'there's nothing in that, it's just something going wrong, it's just a bit of, what we call, noise', until Brown decided it was a genuine phenomenon and produced a genuine hypothesis. Now, I wanted to say of the coincidence explanation and the 'fabrication it just not being true' explanation, they're just lazy hypotheses which we should dismiss.

So, I'm left of those hypotheses really only with the lucky guess one. I'd like to add a further hypothesis that I'm going to take seriously. It's that we human beings do indeed have 'souls'. They are not immaterial things. Rather, they are made of particles, as yet, undiscovered by physicists - particles which interact only weakly with the

familiar ones. Usually these souls, or as I would prefer to call them, 'subtle bodies', are attached to our ordinary bodies. They depart at death and move around on Earth for a while. If someone else's soul happens to be very near my brain, it can cause a simple image in me. So, the recently dead are often able to communicate with the living. And, of course, there are going to be plenty of hypotheses I haven't thought of.

Anyway, to summarise things, my view is that we should list as many hypotheses as possible - the conservative and the radical - and then decide between them; decide which ones best explain the phenomenon.

Drew Khlentzos: I'd like to say a few words about Arcady's story, which is, I think, as striking a tale of precognition as I have ever encountered. Like Peter and Arcady, I'm inclined to believe it, or at least, I can see no reason for disbelieving it. I agree with Peter that we ought to muster the broadest range of possible explanations that we can in trying to account for it. For all I or anyone else knows, there well may be special sorts of undiscovered particles, subtle bodies as Peter calls them, which go to make up material souls. Whether there are such particles, is something I'd look to physics to answer though, since it is the job of physicists to tell us what fundamental particles there are.

At the moment, I can see no reason at all to believe in such bodies, and I can think of several reasons for not believing in material souls in the first place, but I cannot go into those here. So, I'd assign the subtle body hypothesis an extremely low likelihood. Maybe one in ten to the power of twenty chance of being true. Nonetheless, I take it seriously to the extent that I think it could, against all my expectations, turn out to be true - but I wouldn't hold my breath.

So, let me ask a simple question. What is it that needs to be explained in the Lomonosov case? By way of approaching an answer, consider this fanciful example. You are driven to distraction, let us suppose, by your feelings for your friend's partner. You can't work, you can't sleep. So one Friday, you decide to down tools, take an extended weekend break, and go camping in the Washpool forest. Just the tonic you need, you decide, fifteen minutes into the hike. Fifteen minutes later, however, your thoughts have settled into a predictable groove and you're miserable again. 'If only I could see her' you lament out loud. Suddenly you feel a tap on the shoulder. You jump out of your skin with surprise, spin round, heart pounding to see to your utter astonishment, the woman of your dreams, smiling into your eyes. Shock turns to joy. You embrace, you are in love - a miracle surely.

Of course, life is not like that, but suppose it were. What needs to be explained in this case? Well, the striking coincidence of you meeting your loved one on a remote track, miles away from where either of you live. For, let us suppose, you told no one where you were going and neither did she. Surely there must be some sort of fate that brought the two of you together. Surely some sort of mental message must have passed between the two of you. Else, how are you to explain why she was there in exactly the right place at exactly the right time or how her being there at that time answered your deepest need to see her.'

Now if you were in this situation in real life you would, no doubt, be tempted to

believe in miracles, or telepathy, or both. Yet the more prosaic analysis is this: you had your reasons for being there, she had hers. Perhaps you reasons were strictly independent of hers. You wanted to forget you woes in a beautiful setting. She wanted to practice for her forthcoming orienteering championship in Sweden. For both of you, this chance meeting is imbued with great significance, but once we take off the rose-coloured glasses there is nothing miraculous at all about you deciding to go hiking in the Washpool and nothing miraculous about her deciding to go orienteering there at the same time. An onlooker who sees this great display of emotion might be a little embarrassed, but would not think of a person coming across one they cared about in the Washpool as the type of thing on which to base a religion.

In a word, the coincidence requires no explanation. Having explained why you went there and why she did, the coincidence is simply explained away. Now does any of this carry over to the Lomonosov case? At first sight it might seem that very little does. For the match between Mikailo's dream and Vasilai's death is as striking to the onlooker as it must have seemed to Mikailo - quite unlike the Washpool case. For, Mikailo had a dream which apparently anticipated in graphic detail, the very event of his father's demise. So here surely, we do need to explain the coincidence between the dream and the reality. But do we? I'm not so sure. Perhaps all that we really need to explain, is why Mikailo dreamed the dream he did on the one hand, and why Vasilai perished in the tragic way in which he did, on the other. Just like the tale of the trail-crossed lovers, the coincidence can take care of itself, by effectively disappearing.

An immediate problem with this line of thought is that no one really understands why people dream in the first place, let alone why dreams take the particular forms they take, or why they frequently possess such strange and striking contents. Nonetheless, some things can, I believe, be seen in favour of the view I'm proposing. Even if we do not know what causes people to dream, we know that it has something to do with unconscious information processing, and there are some facts here that might be of relevance to the Lomonosov case. Firstly, Mikailo might have been anxious about his father, even if he was not aware of his own anxiety. Various scenarios may have been spun in the information processing room of his brain - some to be stored as film, so to speak, to be later played and viewed, if and when circumstances dictated.

Perhaps long ago Vasilai had taken his son fishing off that very island, on which he was to later perish, and commented then about its dangerous currents and rocks in stormy seas. Alternatively, perhaps his mother Olga, had remonstrated Vasilai when she found out to her dismay that he had taken the young boy there. Perhaps Mikailo overheard some fishermen, one day talking about the dangers of this island. Alternatively, perhaps Mikailo misconstrued the information he heard - the fishermen were actually talking about another island, but Mikailo that they were referring to the ill-fated Karishnikov Island. For Mikailo himself, much of the information about the islands and fishing areas frequented by his father, which he picked up through his senses or through word of mouth, would seem to have been discarded. He certainly would not have been able to have recalled it if prompted. Not so. The brain stores immeasurably more information and misinformation than any which surfaces in awareness. Some of it indeed, is replayed in dreams.

So there is an explanation why Mikailo dreamed his dream, which is every bit as

mundane as for the Washpool case. This explanation has nothing at all to do with telepathy or precognition. Mikailo was worried, or at least thinking about his father, albeit unconsciously, thinking of the dangers the sea presented for an aging fisherman. This island, Karishnikov Island, might not have been one he'd ever visited or seen, possibly one of whose existence he had only heard, or misheard. The details of the imagined island - its location, physical appearance and so on - might nonetheless have fortuitously matched. Ah, but surely this is implausible in the extreme, I hear you object. How can you account for this matching, this fit between the dream and the reality, if not through paranormal means? In much the same way as I can account for the fit between Mikailo's painting of the island off which he feared his father might one day perish and the actual island. Mikailo had no such painting but there might have been. Indeed, Mikailo might have seen one such painting long ago, but forgotten that he had. And the same information, both subliminal and conscious that could have been used to construct the painting could also have been used to construct the dream.

If I'm asked to paint the person my seven year old daughter might marry, I may quite fortuitously, produce an extraordinary likeness. Isn't this stretching the boundaries of what's likely or probable? For surely such a possibility is just too remote. Is it? If we assume that the probability that any particular dream matches some sequence of events in real life in a few vivid details is extremely small, one in ten thousand say, then we assume, for simplicity, that Mikailo dreamt every night of his life and that he was 30 years old when his father perished at sea, we can calculate that in any year Mikailo would had a 0.964 chance of dreaming only non-predictive dreams. So he would have, on average, a 3.6 chance of dreaming a predictive dream. Over 30 years this translates into 388 predictive dreams. Many of these would have been discarded, no doubt, before surfacing in memory or awareness, but at least one of the ones for him was deeply significant, apparently stuck.

Peter Forrest: I'd like to summarise the discussion so far. Arcady presented us with a very striking case of the paranormal and then pointed out that many scientists would say that because it wasn't based on the induction principle, it couldn't count as science, and that many would go on to say that furthermore, if it doesn't count as science, we shouldn't believe it. Arcady pointed to a difficulty in combining these two theses. Namely, that it is very hard to say that the inductive principle itself counts as science. So if we only rely on science, we can't rely on the inductive principle on which science is based.

At that point, I took a slightly different tack and said that the way to assess phenomena is to see what's the best hypothesis: which out of as many as we can think of, best explains the phenomenon in question? So I went through Arcady's five reactions and decided which of those would count as genuine hypotheses. One of them, which I took to be a genuine hypothesis was that there was some kind of intuitive or unconscious inference going on, which although it wouldn't have had a 100 percent chance of being correct had a fair chance. Another one, which might have seemed a bit fanciful to you was that, there were particles not yet discovered by physicists, which I called those that make up subtle bodies, and that the subtle body actually moved and cause images in the brain.

Then Drew presented one particular hypothesis - a variant on the coincidence

hypothesis that I had dismissed as a lazy hypothesis. But instead of treating it as a lazy hypothesis, he analysed it further and came up with some statistics, some estimates of chances to try to show that the coincidence hypothesis was in fact a genuine scientific hypothesis and not a cop-out.

Now, what I would like everyone to do is to think of their own hypotheses or to join the discussion to see which of them they think is the best. Thank you.