Some Speculations on the Facts of Life by David Ellis

When I was a lad, I was just getting my bike out of the school cycle sheds to go home when Kemp came up and asked me whether I knew the facts of life? I had not come across the phrase before and I knew I was not omniscient of matters scientific, so I said “No”. As a result of this conversation, I then found myself rejoining big brother and his mates in the cycle sheds. The next month or two my fellow pupils did their best to remedy what they saw as a gap in my education, and I learnt quite a lot. Finally I told my friend Sims that, really, I had known all along, and he said he had suspected as much . . .

Today, however, I intend to take the title rather more literally and see what facts about life we can regard as established, and offer some speculations about other possible facts which are not established with any certainty.

Twenty-nine years ago I was fortunate enough to attend a Parapsychology Foundation (PF) Conference. The late D. Scott Rogo (then 22) wrote a summary for the Parapsychology Review, saying how nice it had been to see so many participants under thirty. That put me, at thirty-one, among the old-timers, but there is the sadness . . . that it represents the very opposite—a waking-up from the dream of life.

What can be asserted as a fact, however, is that life is an experience, and our communion with other people strongly suggests that life for them is an experience as well. Parapsychology, was followed by a “Methodological Postulates for Science and the Paranormal”, was followed by a very interesting discussion on the difference between objective and subjective experiences. At one point Cahn asked, "How do we know, if I say 'I am observing the glass'?, in what way my experience of observing the glass is any more valid than the state of reality than the statement made by a person who says 'I observe an auric' or something of that kind? . . . Let me ask you how do we know, to start with, any more about the objective existence of the glass other than through the reports, or maybe through consensus?" The philosopher Antony Flew said that the crucial difference was whether the glass was there or not. Bob Brier then commented “. . . when I say I was drunk and I saw a green man, it is different from when I say there is a green man there. When I say ‘there is a green man there’, I am making the claim that you will be able to see it too.” To which Cahn replied, “That is the point I was trying to make. We agree that the glass is here, yet the only experience we have of the glass is our subjective experience. The agreement is called consensus.”

The same goes for our experience of life: Our ideas about the reality and the objectivity of the world we appear to inhabit are derived entirely from our own observations and from how these are reinforced and supplemented—or perhaps denied—by the reported experiences of other people. So if there is anything in Lewis Carroll’s hypothesis that life is a dream, then it would seem to be a shared dream.

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“…it’s only the Red King snoring,” said Tweedledum. “He’s a dreamer,” said Tweedledee, “and what do you think he’s dreaming about?” Alice said, “Nobody can guess that.” “Wily, about you!” Tweedledee exclaimed … “And if he left off dreaming about you, where
At My Desk

Back in November 2011, I was contacted by Geoffrey Allain Marsh, son of Dr. Maurice Marsh, now retired, formerly of the School of Psychology, University of New England. As Dr. Marsh, whose PhD was on an ESP-related topic, recently went into an aged care facility, my offer to help in finding people or organisations who might be interested in Dr. Marsh’s library of SPR journals dating back to the 1880’s, as well as his library of parapsychology, psychology, and related books. Naturally, the AIPR took up Geoffrey’s generous offer and, going one step further, Mr. Robb Tilley, AIPR Public Officer, drove to Armidale from Sydney to collect the books and journals. On behalf of the AIPR, Robb and I thank Dr. Marsh and Mr. Tilley for the generous and most welcome donation of the impressive Marsh Collection, which will help expand the AIPR Library in Sydney. Also in November, the 3rd Annual AIPR Lecture given by Dr. Tony Jinks (University of Western Sydney) at the Phoenix Institute of Western Sydney (University of New England) on the 29th, was a great success. While we did not get the numbers we anticipated, the warm and intimate group of die-hard supporters of parapsychology (of Australia) were entranced by Tony’s topic for the night— What Is Paranormal Belief and Can It Be Measured? Put briefly, it seems some psi measures aren’t really all that valid. Tony’s work answering this question is featured in his recently released book: An Introduction to the Psychology of Paranormal Belief and Experience. Tony’s book will be reviewed in the June 2012 issue of AJPara for those interested in this area of psi research.

Got something to say about parapsychology or the paranormal? Submit your contribution to:
Dr. Lance Storm, School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, SA 5005
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with the physical world: For example, if it can obtain information from anywhere else but the brain with which it is normally associated, it will, by virtue of the illusion that it is located in that brain, have the experience of the phenomenon of ESP.

Postulating that an apparition was produced by the personalities of two or more people, Tyrell gave it a measure of objectivity. He considered the possibility of an apparitional world, experienced collectively by a large group of individuals:

Each would play his part in the theme of the idea-pattern, so that the net result would be that the whole group of persons would appear to themselves to be living in the same environment as the apparition pattern imposed upon them. If we take a further step and suppose these persons to have shed their physical bodies, and otherwise changed their personalities, then this impressed, hallucinatory world would have no competitor.13

This intriguing picture of a hypothetical ‘next world’ is not incompatible with descriptions received through mediumistic communications, and this raises some interesting questions. What sort of properties would it have? Would these depend on the desires and beliefs of the people, or be objective in themselves? Could one or more of the people conduct scientific experiments and make discoveries?

Noting Tyrell’s theory that the percipient’s ‘mind-level elements of his personality’ contributes to the creation of an apparition, one might expect that this apparitional world would differ from ours in being more ‘idea-plastic’, i.e., more responsive to the thoughts of its inhabitants. Whilst I am sure that they would find this creative ability useful, I think that they would be at a considerable disadvantage when they came to undertake any scientific investigation in that they would be unable to separate fact from fiction, genuine experimental results from the effects of wishful thinking?

Is there a belief behind these experiments in the physical sciences?
in a hypothetical 'next world', and our experiments with psi in this world? Do our ideas, conscious, unconscious or implied, have their impact on the phenomena? When talking about this 29 years ago, I felt obliged to give some well-known examples of the experimenter effect; today I don’t think I need to. The idea I should like to get across is that the physical world, albeit to a much lesser extent than Tyrrell’s apparitional one, might also be 'ideo-plastic'; perhaps because we who are living in it are that much more real than the natural world, just as we are more real than our nocturnal-dream world.

I think this may be subtly different from the simple Dualist concept of mind and matter as co-existing 'things' in the physical world.

Let us now return to Tyrrell’s apparitional ‘next world’, a hallucinatory world as real to its inhabitants as the physical world is to us, and ask the obvious question: If that can be so, how can we tell that our apparently physical world is not equally hallucinatory? Could not the whole physical universe be described, 'picturesquely' if you will, as, ‘thoughts in the mind of God’?

Indeed, I suggest that this way of looking at the physical world in relation to its Creator may be more than just a picturesque metaphor. Man can create, by which I mean produce something without recourse to material conditions—such for example as we might be taught, by exercising his imagination. Perhaps the created universe, with its intricate interplay of space, time and matter, can be regarded analogously as a product of the Divine imagination! Man will experience this universe as real, because he is part of it, and objective, because he has played no part in its creation. But perhaps he has played—or can play—some tiny part in its creation or development: Could his creative talent and his being, as I have just suggested, that much more real than this physical world, have given the latter just a little ideo-plasticity, which might allow for the intrusion into it of psi phenomena?

Our technology can produce a gramophone record, or a recording tape, or a compact disc which will allow a very good reproduction of. say, a piece of music. The music is something apart from its mode of recording, so could the experience of living be likened to the experience of listening to the music, taken off the record by gramophone needle or tape-head at a suitable point? Are our brains the tape-heads in a threedimensional, multi-sensory film of life? Thinking of our Creator as the Author of Life, are we but characters brought into existence by His imagination? Or is He asleep and dreaming about us, like the Red King? If that were all there were to reality, we should have strict determinism, but if we could somehow affect the 'story' then we should have some free will. The fact that we do actually have the subjective experience of free will suggests that the latter might be true. But who can tell?

The question of what comprises reality—even just in this world—is a difficult one. It is certainly not synonymous with concrete physical existence, but must also include abstract concepts, such as mathematical truths. How does the abstract interact with the concrete? How do mathematical equations affect the matter whose behaviour they describe?

Consider a piece of string. Tie a knot in it. Take away the knot and the string is unchanged, apart from a dent or two. Now retie the knot and take away the string: What happens to the knot? It still has theoretical existence. Moreover, it is independent of space and time. The reef knot may have been invented for tying reefs on sails. But it could have been tied anywhere, using anything suitably flexible, millions of years before its invention. The DNA code is an arrangement of organic molecules and groups; it determines our heredity and all our human characteristics, yet it is no more than an arrangement of atoms, a 'knot in a piece of string'. Elementary particles can be described also as waves, 'vibrations' in a hypothetical 'ether'. What is it that vibrates? The answer is: Nothing. Experiments have shown that the "ether" does not exist at all. Does that leave these particles in the same situation as the knot without the string? Could this be how matter has been created out of nothing?

I have asked how abstract concepts such as mathematical equations can interact with concrete physical matter; how, for example, I outlined some of Tyrrell’s theory of apparitions where he postulates that an apparition is a sensory construct derived from both the agent and the percipient, thus having a degree of objectivity; and I described his hypothetical ‘next world’ that was objective in its existing independently of the percipients, and comprised not physical substance but an ‘all-pervasive idea pattern’. Common to all these is the supposition that an idea, while normally associated with the material configuration by which it is expressed, can have some independent, albeit non-material or abstract, existence of its own.

One might therefore think of, say, a Zener card with a star on it as being associated with the idea of a star. This idea could be transferred to the mind of a percipient by the normal processes of visual sense perception and pattern recognition. Suppose, though, that it could instead be transferred directly to the mind of another percipient (who by some process of concentration mentally ‘summons’ it). This would be clairvoyance. Note that if the idea which is transferred, is necessarily the shape of the symbol. If this is so, then it does not matter how the idea is expressed: It could be in a language with which the percipient is not familiar, or in terms of the electronic configuration of a machine. To the layman, my assertion that life is primarily an experience is no more than common sense, a statement of the obvious. To the modern scientist, however, if my reading of book reviews and other items in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research is anything to go by, my consciousness is but an illusion. I am experiencing nothing, because there is nothing here to experience it. Nor to be suffering the illusion either, I suppose. Has he forgotten the vital role of consciousness in establishing the validity of any observation (scientific or otherwise), as discussed by Cahn and Brier? Science has indeed been an immensely successful enterprise, and the technology resulting from it has affected all our lives. Yet how much closer have we got to working out why anything exists at all, and how what does exist fits together?

I suspect, for example, it is still the case that the more we find out about the fundamental particles which constitute matter, the more we find ourselves describing their behaviour in terms of mathematical equations and formulation of increasing complexity, and the less we are able to visualize what is going on in simple pictorial terms. It might be relevant to consider this statement from a physicist, Arthur March:

Elementary particles cannot be described in the conceivable three space dimensions. Contemporary physics, therefore, is forced to use abstract means for their presentation. There are those who object to these means, just because they are
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inconceivable. The means are, however, understandable. We understand just a little more convincible. If we can refer it back to a natural law. But the law itself we can only understand if it expresses a logical necessity, which implies that we are not confronted with a genuine law of nature but with a law of our thinking. We do not understand the real natural laws, but have to take them for granted. Thereby there is nothing which privileges us to demand from the laws that they shall be conceivable. What we can demand is only that they shall not interfere with the laws of logic, which simply means that they shall not be contradictory in themselves.15 (my emphasis).

In this article, I have used the analogy of a dreamer being more ‘real’ than his dream world to suggest a way of looking at life. Analogies neither prove nor explain anything, but they may serve to render something just a little more conceivable. Psychical research concerns itself perhaps more than any other discipline with matters of life and death: Survival, reincarnation, deathbed visions, how the living appear to the dead, and the possibility of ghosts, I challenge anyone—perhaps even expected—to try to make contact with the more recently deceased.

All of a sudden it is 2AM. We are all exhausted but exhilarated. The two groups combine back into one and share their findings. We only had one potentially anomalous event occur, and the other group reported the same. We won’t know for sure until the digital information is downloaded and trawled through. Part of the tour price includes a copy of the DVD with the evidence that has been gathered in the course of the evening. This will at least ensure it is not just our imaginations at work. The debates about what to make of any anomalies will no doubt be ongoing.

Whatever you think about the possibility of ghosts, I challenge anyone—perhaps even expected—to try to make contact with the more recently deceased.

### Notes

3. Ibid., 49.
4. Ibid., 50.
5. Ibid., 50.
6. Ibid., 50.
7. Carroll, Looking Glass, Ch. 4.
11. Tyrrell, Apparitions: 118.
12. Ibid., 121.
13. Ibid., 156.
14. Ibid., 156.
16. H. Forwald, Mind, Matter and Gravitation: Theoretical and Experimental Study. Parapsychological Monographs No.11 (NY: Parapsychology Foundation, 1972): 13. This passage is quoted in its original German from the above reference by Haakan Forwald, who noted that it is difficulty to translate literally into English, but says that the sense of it should be as given.