

## Editorial: 'More things in heaven and earth'

Well, maybe not. It all depends on your philosophy, and perhaps a bit on heaven and earth too.

Nothing, though, enrages the average philosopher these days more than the obdurate, even pig-headed refusal of the general public to abandon its belief in ESP and the paranormal. Most philosophers, even in Britain, do not read the London Daily Mail. So their breakfast-time composure will not have been ruffled by the report of its science correspondent on November 26th, 1997, that a survey of 6,238 mainly intelligent and mature Britons showed that 59% believed in ESP.\* Worse, those who believed were generally speaking no worse judges of the probability of coincidences than those sceptical of the claims of psychics, clairvoyants and the like. Furthermore, it appears that belief in the paranormal has not diminished over time to any great extent. Dr Susan Blackmore, who was responsible for the research for the survey commented that all this goes to show that science education 'hasn't made any difference'.

The picture may, though, be a little more complicated than this suggests. While among some people science may have produced scepticism about the paranormal, might it not be that among others 'science education' has tended to produce an equal and opposite reaction, a sense that the scientific reductionism preached by many advocates of 'science' just cannot be the whole story about human life (or indeed about anything else)? With the decline of orthodox religion (traditionally hostile to the activities of psychics and clairvoyants), science education may actually be promoting superstitions of all sorts. For as Chesterton observed, when people stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing. They start believing in anything—and, particularly, one might surmise, in anything which seems to respond to their personal sense that there must be more meaning in life than that acknowledged by proponents of scientifically based materialism. As support for Chesterton's observation, in February 1998, *The Daily Mail* (again!) reported that 64% of Britons now believe in 'psychic powers', rather more than admit to a belief in God.

\* The results of the survey were originally published in *The British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 88, 1997, pp. 683–9, under the title, 'Probability misjudgment and the belief in the paranormal: a newspaper survey'.

## Editorial

The tradition of C. D. Broad and H. H. Price and the more recent efforts of Hans Eysenck notwithstanding, to most readers of *Philosophy*, ESP, clairvoyance and astrology will seem foolish and shallow. They may indeed be foolish and shallow. But they may not be as foolish and shallow as the presumption that science can explain everything, and that there is no wisdom to be had other than that dispensed by popular science. Officially we live in a world devoid of meaning and mystery. Our public discourse is largely and increasingly ruled by a narrow pseudo-scientific rationality, as is our politics and our morality.

If nothing else, the persistence of belief in the paranormal testifies to a bloody-mindedness in the population against the weight of received and often unthinking expertise, a bloody-mindedness for which we might be able to manage one cheer. Philosophers worried about their blood pressure might be able to relax a little if they come to view the source of this popular resistance as, in a muddled sense, philosophical.