

Normal and Supernormal

In the title I have given to this service I feel I have inevitably begged the question. The question, "Is there such a thing or state of being we can reasonably call the supernormal?" And, if so, how can we know anything about it - firmly situated, as we feel ourselves to be - in the security and limitations of the evidence of our five senses? Of course there are many other words I might have used. Both Roget's Thesaurus and the OED reveal a plethora of synonyms, as they seem mostly to be. But the definition of supernormal seemed the most satisfactory: "phenomena of an extraordinary kind, involving a higher law or principle than those ordinarily occurring, but not necessarily supernatural"... So I settled for supernormal, not because I do not want to have to deal with the supernatural - quite the contrary, in fact - but because 'supernormal' helps us to include at least some reference to the extraordinary results which have occurred in more recent experiments in atomic physics. I refer to the experiments which now appear to demonstrate that under certain conditions particular particles can be recorded in more than one place at the same time. Or how, in experiments with light particles called photons, if you observe them with a particle detector you find you are dealing with a particle, but if you look at the same particles with a wave-detector you find you are dealing with a wave. Results of experiments such as these - and if I were more of an atomic physicist than a retired dramatherapist, I would be able to describe many more - all of which confound the ideas of physical normality which were current when I was a student in the fifties.

Of course none of these remarkable experiments could be carried out by laypeople such as you and I. We would need special training - and immense mathematical ability - and we would of course need the facilities of a modern physics laboratory. All of these requirements we take for granted - only certain kinds of people using particular kinds of equipment under particular sorts of circumstances could attempt such experiments and hope to produce convincing results. But - if I may now refer to what is ordinarily understood to be the supernatural - it has been my experience, and perhaps there are those here who have had similar experiences, where in particular kinds of meditation group, with a particular mix of participants, I have both witnessed in two others and experienced in myself a state of exaltation and spiritual insight which it seems I am ordinarily incapable of attaining. My reading and experience as a poet and also a former dramatherapist convinces me that such paranormal or supernormal experiences are more 'ordinary' or 'common' or 'normal' than we usually allow ourselves to suppose.

In our first reading we heard of experiences and forms of belief which were taken to be normal for all generations prior to the latter part of the eighteenth century which thereafter were deemed to be abnormal and aberrant. Quite suddenly, in the experience of most people other than 'men of science' (as they were called then), beliefs long taken for granted were called into question, even ridiculed. It seems to me undeniable that the word 'normal' is what philosophers of the fifties primly termed "portmanteau terms". By this they meant that like some of those delightful words invented by Lewis Carroll (such as 'slithy' - a combination of slimy and slippery) our word 'normal' can combine with the meanings of other words to mean different things or experiences in different societies, cultural traditions and historical periods.

For example Tsunesaburo Mkiuchi (1871-1944), a Japanese Buddhist, became the first president of a Buddhist society dedicated to reawakening us to the intimate relationships between human beings and natural objects. In a passage in a monograph to one of his more recent disciples entitled "The Environmental Problem and Buddhism", dealing with the element of sympathy in the relation between a mountain and a human being, Mkiuchi says: "The mountain which until now has towered as something different and apart, is recognised as part of the world, like the self with which it exists in a mutual relationship. The mountain becomes a sentient being and relations with it become sentient too. The self becomes one with the mountain, sharing its sorrows and joys and experiencing its fate. Ultimately this feeling extends to the whole of society protected by the mountain..." In this connection too I am irresistibly drawn to think of poems by Buddhist poets of nature, ancient and modern; and inevitably too I think of particular poets of nature in our own cultural tradition such as Wordsworth, John Keats, and John Clare.

Those of us who are familiar with the work of Eileen Caddy and the remarkable relationships which many of those living in Findhorn have achieved with plants and the natural world, can see this as further examples of the benefits of an intense and sympathetic relationship with the world, as opposed to dealing with it collectively as unresponsive, soulless objects which we are at liberty to exploit and misuse.

Inevitably, however, in a civilisation such as ours, which is still heavily influenced by mechanistic scientific criteria of normality which were so firmly established in the nineteenth century and consolidated throughout most of the twentieth, most of us will want to focus attention upon the question of evidence. "What evidence is there," you may ask, "for any kind of belief in the supernormal or supernatural - whatever you want to call it?" To this question I think it is best to say straight out that if you are

looking for evidence such as accumulated by the so-called 'hard sciences' such as physics, geology, chemistry and biology, this can neither be acquired nor verified under the laboratory conditions appropriate to these sciences. This was the view, with which I concur, of my late friend and author on psychic experiences, Paul Beard. He spent many years of patient listening in what he preferred to call 'communication sessions' with gifted psychics and mediums, and he was not in the least inclined to accept as evidence insincere or casual application to the task of attempting communication with those we ordinarily call 'dead'. He worked hard at accumulating as much evidence of personal survival as he could, and he wrote about his experiences in a small number of books which many of those who are concerned with such experiences have felt to be exemplars of their kind. I would like to read to you the conclusion of one of his last books entitled "Living On".

"In terms of spirit, there is all the time in the world for the development and spiritualising of mankind to come about. In terms of earth, a speeding up of individual consciousness in this century is vitally necessary. It becomes extremely urgent to overcome the retardments brought about by many generations of selfish, materialistic thought and action. The consequences threaten man on every side with pollution, economic chaos and destruction. It is necessary to learn how to respond to the more speedy spiritual pace seemingly now planned for - planning which is the fruit of beings in the higher worlds whose intentions gradually percolate through minds on earth. Oliver Lodge, after his death (speaking through a medium), emphatically declared: "There is only one world, and we must take down these... barriers of illusion that compelled us to think there must be two, because through our limitations and ignorance we are unable to look over the self-erected barrier, or to look through it. It must come down. It is your work, it is our work! ..."

This is the most important of all the implications of survival (Paul Beard continues): "that the spiritual task which lies before men and women on earth and those who have passed through death is a shared and common one, and not separate and distinct. Parts of it have to be performed individually and parts in collaboration. The collaboration is always there, even when it is not consciously accepted by those on earth. This task is the regeneration of the world by regeneration of the individual, and bringing on earth of the Kingdom of Heaven which, as Jesus said, is within and awaits there its finding by every man and woman..."

Finally, I would like to say that in what I have said, I am not trying to persuade you to take on board my own personal conviction in the reality of human survival of death. As a Unitarian I know of course that this would be inappropriate and presumptuous. We all need to make our own enquiries and our own assessment of whatever evidence we manage to accumulate. But I do urge you to move towards some re-evaluation of the possibility of what I will call 'dimensions of being' beyond what is still in our culture thought to be normal. This is a direction in which several men and women I have known in my life have moved, and it is perhaps an appropriate one for Unitarians, since it is a path of enquiry and assessment of evidence which many of us feel is increasingly vital, as Paul Beard felt, for our continuing survival and welfare. It is a path of enquiry which inevitably leads us to reassess and realign the paradigms of what for most of the past three centuries has been deemed to be 'normal' and 'rational'. And it is also, I believe, a path which leads us to a greater access of compassion and love for each other and all other living things.