



**James Alcock, Jean Burns and Anthony Freeman (eds), *Psi Wars – Getting to Grips with the Paranormal* (Imprint Academic, Exeter, UK, 2003) \$ 29.90, 246pp., ISBN 0-907845-48-7, published in the Leonardo On-Line Reviews (2005)**

As much as the famous Richard Feynman aphorism that ‘nobody understands quantum mechanics’ one could argue, as well, that ‘nobody understands psi’.

In a personal introduction titled *A Long Time Coming*, Anthony Freeman, one of the editors of *Psi Wars* refers to a rather lengthy process involved in putting together this collection of essays at the interface of parapsychology and mainstream scientific research and philosophical controversy. An editor with the internationally acclaimed *British Journal of Consciousness Studies* (JCS), he recalls that, although at times ‘frustrating’, this process was nevertheless a profoundly critical and reflective one. His editorial remarks regarding the suspicions and the mistrust between the protagonists of anomalous effects and the sceptics, and his long struggle for a ‘fair and balanced’ special issue reminded me of similar situations in my own experience: this is precisely what I have encountered when I have been ‘programming’ the Swiss Biennial on Science, Technics and Aesthetics with proponents and critics from novel fields like quantum teleportation and consciousness at the frontiers of contemporary scientific research. The major challenge when one is looking for new ways to scrutinize the potential of relating different discourses and methodologies in quantum physics and consciousness studies, or philosophy and art, for example, it to win academic researchers interested in public controversy and debate – beyond of what is normally referred to as the ivory towers of specialized scientific knowledge production.

To speak with Ernst Cassirer, *Psi Wars* must be welcomed as a vital and important contribution to our theoretical understanding of the world because it challenges our notions and our knowledge of the physical world. And it does it by offering the reader a collection of (self)critical essays from both sides, the parapsychologists’ and the sceptics’ view in the form of a fair play. Thus, the discussion doesn’t circumvent delicate but yet relevant issues of the current psi debate such as e.g. participant fraud or experimenter error, the so called psi ‘experimenter effect’ (experimenters may be a potentially more significant source of psi); problematic claims for anomalous events like false memories; austere arguments against the longstanding reports for the conventional psychokinesis hypothesis; or the basic challenge of replicability, just to mention a few of this volume.

In his contribution, the parapsychologist Matthew D. Smith discusses precisely the important role of the experimenter in parapsychology («‘successful’ psi experimenters tend to have more positive attitudes towards psi phenomena than ‘unsuccessful’ experimenters») investigating the peculiar ‘experimenter effect’ (2003: 72). He considers the phenomenon from the perspective of how the experimenter treats his or her participants and

parapsychological variables, and of how the experimenter may use his or her own psi to influence the data. This is where Smith sees a major obstacle that has hindered replication attempts of psi effects, thus preventing widespread acceptance of the field within mainstream science.

As it is discussed in several contributions in *Psi Wars*, the major challenge facing modern parapsychology continues to be the replicability of psi. Two different types of psi studies and experiments are usually referred to in this context: extrasensory perception (ESP) further classified as telepathy, clairvoyance, pre- and retrocognition – and psychokinesis (PK). ESP refers to the transfer of information without using any known physical mechanism, and PK means the action of mental intention on matter without using any known physical mechanism. Co-editor James E. Alcock (representing the sceptics' side), who addresses the replicability issue in 'Give the Null Hypothesis a Chance', writes: « (...) The concept of replicability, to be useful, implies that researchers in general, provided that they have the expertise and equipment, should be able to reproduce the reported results, and not just those who are believers and enthusiasts» adding that «parapsychologists have never been able to produce a successful experiment that neutral scientists, with the appropriate skill, knowledge and equipment, can replicate. (...) » (2003: 35). Alcock then concludes with the assumption that the search for psi will go on for a long time to come because «I can think of nothing that would ever persuade those who pursue it that the Null hypothesis is probably true» (2003: 49).

Yet, although there seems to be some kind of definite conclusion at this point other parts of the volume reveal more tacit expectations, comparable to those expressed by Ernst Cassirer more than half a century ago: he ends *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics* speaking of the urge to seek «the full concept of reality, which requires the cooperation of all functions of the spirit and that can only be reached through all of them together». This kind of mental search is manifested in co-editor Jean E. Burns' insight in her article 'What is Beyond the Edge of the Known World?' in which she argues that «if psi were not such an elusive phenomenon lacking contemporary known methods by which it could be reliably (re)produced, it would probably be accepted as a subject of study provided that there were a 'theoretical structure' which could make predictions about the dependence of psi on physical parameters» (2003: 25). Burns then gazes with more or less mild eyes at the psi researchers' claims such as, for example, remote viewing or psi in the dream state.

To conclude, one of the major revelations of *Psi Wars* is certainly its more or less subtle concern with what I would call the 'heart' of an often circumvented and important issue called *scientific methodology*. James E. Alcock's somehow biased assumption in support of mainstream science's «belief in the *power* of the scientific method to reveal truth in nature» (2003: 49) may be read in support of what could well be labelled as a kind of *scientific epistemophilia* (Thanks to Michael Punt who brought this aspect to my view at the 6th Swiss Biennial on Science, Technics and Aesthetics). Looking at *Psi Wars* from this perspective, it is not only about the war between parapsychologists and mainstream science and its methods. It also reminds us indirectly of the fact that the objectivist program of the sciences which cannot itself provide a satisfactory account of human understanding nor of the issues requiring such an account like human language and communication, the human sciences, or moral and aesthetic values – should grasp the great opportunity for a change.

It is probably known that the physicist Wolfgang Pauli (there are several references in *Psi Wars* to his ingenious nevertheless speculative findings – most of them over half a century old) in correspondence with the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung raised the question whether

the *psychic condition* of the observor might play a crucial role in the act of perception of reality.

Pauli's notion could support, as far as I can see it, a major issue in consciousness research that is emphasized now even stronger by the public availability of the psi debate: Subjective mental phenomena should be taken at least as seriously as objective physical phenomena. But what is really needed today in the field of scientific investigation into consciousness are ongoing research ideas that include a change in the ideology and methodology of contemporary science.

That the quantum mechanics (the book offers an incredible number of excellent physical references) that we have today could be overcome by something else may not necessarily be good news for all physicists. Roger Penrose sent me his ideas regarding the possibilities for a change which – I hope – will support some of my critical points from above: « (...) It seems to me if you take a realistic view – which I do and John Bell [the physicist] did – then you are driven to the view that something must go wrong with quantum mechanics at some level. Now to me this is not such a shock because after all quantum mechanics has only been around for about a hundred years. And that is not so long if you think of how long Newtonian mechanics has been around, and how much time it took to realize that there was a different point of view needed. So it seems to me that we have every reason to believe that at some stage the quantum mechanics that we now have, which is based on *linear* evolution will be superseded by something else. It seems to me to be very understandable that we don't know yet what it is (...) ».

René Stettler, Lucerne, November 2005