

*Staking Out the Bounds of Science:
Immanuel Kant's Assessment of the Paranormal*

by

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The controversy¹ set off by the announcement that the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* had accepted an article on paranormal psychology by Cornell Professor Daryl Bem² raises some of the same epistemological and metaphysical questions examined by Immanuel Kant in his 1766 treatise *Dreams of a Spirit-seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*.³ Although methodological issues raised by Bem's article are different from those addressed by Kant, the central question -- whether phenomena beyond the realm of ordinary perception should be treated as appropriate subjects of scientific inquiry -- is the same. Kant's response is complex. He recognizes an imperative of science to test the limits of the possible, but is skeptical of claims that fly in the face of ordinary experience. Atypical phenomena that can be examined using the methods of natural science are fit subjects for inquiry, although studying them often turns out to be a waste of time. But claims based on unique or private experience not available to the common run of mankind -- or explanations of paranormal phenomena based on metaphysical principles not derived from common experience -- are most likely delusions that deserve to be ignored.

Kant's treatise grew out of his fascination with paranormal phenomena. In the late 1750's, as he was establishing his reputation as a serious scientist and philosopher, his friends began to ask his opinion about reports that Emanuel Swedenborg, a scientist and engineer turned mystic, could communicate with the dead. Kant investigated these stories carefully. He even wrote to Swedenborg, but did not receive an answer.

He described the results of his investigations in a letter to Charlotte von Knobloch, a young woman of his acquaintance, posted in 1763⁴ in which he relates three incidents that seem to demonstrate Swedenborg's extraordinary powers.

¹ Benedict Carey, *New York Times*, "Journal's Paper on ESP Expected to Prompt Outrage" January 5, 2011.

² Daryl J. Bem, "Feeling the Future: Experimental Evidence for Anomalous Retroactive Influences on Cognition and Affect", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, American Psychological Association. A copy of the paper is available on line at <http://dbem.ws/FeelingFuture.pdf>. The article is about *psi*, which according to Bem, "denotes anomalous processes of information or energy transfer that are currently unexplained in terms of known physical or biological mechanisms."

³ I have used the translation by Gregory R. Johnson and Glenn Alexander Magee in *Kant on Swedenborg: Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Other Writings*, Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 2002. Interpretation of the treatise is greatly facilitated by the supplementary materials and notes in this very helpful volume, which is available in an inexpensive paperback edition.

⁴ Questions about the date of the letter have generated a long history of debate, the main outline of which can be found in Johnson's note 2 on the letter in *Kant on Swedenborg*, page 183.

The first involves Louisa Ulrica, Queen of Sweden, who asked Swedenborg to contact her dead brother. Some days later Swedenborg returned and whispered something in the Queen's ear that visibly startled her. She revealed that Swedenborg had told her something only she and her brother could have known. The second incident concerns the widow of a Dutch Ambassador, Count von Marteville, who commissioned Swedenborg to ask her dead husband the whereabouts of a receipt for an expensive silver service she was sure he had paid. A few days later, after consulting with the dead Count, Swedenborg led her to a secret compartment in the Count's bureau which contained the missing receipt. According to a third story, Swedenborg was present at a dinner party in Gothenburg when he became agitated, saying a fire was raging near his house in Stockholm, three hundred miles away. After several anxious hours, in which Swedenborg described the fire in detail, he reported that the fire had been extinguished. The next morning, the incident was reported to the Governor. Days later, couriers arrived, providing details of the fire, just as Swedenborg had described it.

All the evidence Kant could collect about these stories supported their authenticity. They were witnessed by credible people and reported in realistic detail. Still Kant was skeptical, telling his young friend that "notwithstanding all the stories of apparitions and deeds of the spirit kingdom, of which a great many of the most probable are known to me, I have always considered it to be most in agreement with the rule of common sense to lean to the negative side; not as if I presumed to have seen into the impossibility of it (for how little is the nature of a spirit still known to us?), but rather because on the whole it is not sufficiently proved..."⁵

Despite his negative leanings, Kant remained intrigued by Swedenborg's activities. "How much I wish that I could have questioned this remarkable man myself," Kant tells his young correspondent. "I await with longing the book that Swedenborg will publish in London. I have made every provision for receiving it as soon as it leaves the press."⁶ He purchased Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestis*⁷ for £7 sterling and read it through.

⁵ Letter to *Charlotte von Knobloch* 10:44 [2], in *Kant on Swedenborg*, page 67.

⁶ Letter to *Charlotte von Knobloch* 10:48 [7], in *Kant on Swedenborg*, page 71.

⁷ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia: The Heavenly Arcana contained in the Holy Scripture or Word of the Lord Unfolded Beginning with the Book of Genesis Together with Wonderful Things Seen in the World of Spirits and in the Heaven of Angels*, revised and edited by Rev. John Faulkner Potts, New York, The American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society, 1920. Kant mentions the purchase price in *Dreams*, 2:366 [11] p. 55.

The *Arcana* is Swedenborg's exposition of the "inner sense" of the Bible, similar in some ways to Maimonides' *The Guide for the Perplexed*. But while Maimonides found an allegorical meaning in the scriptures derived from a commonly shared Jewish tradition, Swedenborg read the bible as a code which he alone could interpret because of his unique ability to communicate with pure spirits. In the *Arcana*, he describes how one day after being rendered insensible to earthly experience, he woke in the presence of celestial angels communicating with him by direct transfer of thoughts. He saw a bright white light, followed by the vision of a young man sitting on a horse, aimed in the direction of hell. When the horse refused to move, the young man dismounted and began to climb upwardly sloping hills - a sign of his ascent into heaven.⁸

That Kant gave any credence to such nonsense was something of an embarrassment to him, but having spent the money to buy the book and taken the time to read it, he felt he had no alternative but to write about it.⁹

A central question of Kant's treatise is whether Swedenborg's claims should be taken seriously.¹⁰ After a prologue that "promises very little for the project," Kant considers how these phenomena might be explained in a "dogmatic" part, then presents the empirical evidence supporting them in an "historical" part.

In the dogmatic part, Kant offers two possible explanations for Swedenborg's psychic feats. One is that human beings can actually communicate with the dead. This would mean that there is community of spirits who communicate with one another and that a mechanism exists for translating spiritual communications into representations understood by human beings. A second and more "commonly acceptable" explanation is that Swedenborg is suffering from a brain disorder that causes him to mistake internal imaginings for external realities.

⁸ *Arcana*, §§ 168 - 189, pp. 78 - 81.

⁹ *Dreams*, 2:318 [3] p. 4 and 2:367 [12] p. 56. Kant published the treatise anonymously. He says he wrote it to satisfy the demands of inquisitive and idle friends. If he were writing it today, he probably would publish it as a blog on his webpage rather than submit it to a scholarly journal.

¹⁰ In the prologue, (*Dreams*, 2:317 [1] p. 3.) Kant describes his situation: "What philosopher has not at one time, torn between the assurances of a rational and firmly convinced eyewitness on the one hand and the inner resistance of an insuperable doubt on the other, cut the most simple-minded figure one can imagine? Should he wholly deny the veracity of all such spirit apparitions? What reasons can he bring forward to refute them?" There is, Kant notes, a third alternative - simply ignoring the question. "But," he says, tongue in cheek, "since this suggestion is reasonable, it is always rejected, by majority vote, by rigorous scholars." *Dreams*, 2:318 [2] p.4.

Kant's account of a metaphysical theory that might explain Swedenborg's communication with spirits requires him to take a journey into "the realm of shades", an unbounded land which visionaries can cultivate at their pleasure.¹¹ He starts from a position of Socratic ignorance. "I do not know... whether there are spirits;" he says, "indeed, what is more, I do not know what the word spirit means."¹² His ignorance is conditioned by his assumption that the concept of a spirit is not abstracted from empirical concepts. He arrives at an understanding of spirit by comparing his "ill-understood concept" of spirit with all cases where it can be applied consistently.¹³

In the first chapter of the dogmatic part, Kant identifies spirit with the human soul and contrasts it with corporeal being. Corporeal beings are impenetrable; the space they occupy cannot be occupied by other beings of the same type without their being displaced. Spirits, on the other hand, lack this feature of impenetrability. They exist within spaces - not by filling them, but by being active in them, as the soul is active in the body. Although Kant identifies the human soul with spirit, he notes that defining spirit in this way is far from proving its existence, or even its possibility. We do not understand, he says, what the soul is or how it moves the body; but this should not surprise us given that reason can never really comprehend the possibility of any causal relationship.¹⁴

Kant ridicules the Cartesian idea that the soul -- like a spider in its web -- occupies a tiny space in the brain, from which "it moves the ropes and levers of the whole machine."¹⁵ He opts instead for the scholastic theory that the soul is wholly present throughout the body and equally in every one of its parts, observing dryly that when his corn aches he feels it at the end of his toe, not in a nerve in his brain. He cannot prove or explain his opinion, but accepts it on the basis of common sense.

In the second chapter he defines spirit more generally as the "ground of life in the universe." Material beings are by nature inert, moved only from without. If we shift our attention, however, from the mechanical to the organic, we encounter the idea of a being

¹¹ *Dreams*, 2:317 [1] p. 3.

¹² *Dreams*, 2:320 [2] p. 5. Kant's statement calls to mind Socrates' reply to Meno: "far from knowing whether [virtue] can be taught or how it is acquired, I have no idea what virtue itself is. *Meno*, 71.

¹³ Later in the treatise, (*Dreams*, 2:247 [7] p. 34.) he describes his concept of spirit as "extracted from common linguistic usage."

¹⁴ *Dreams*, 2:323 [6] p. 9. Johnson notes the connection between Kant's statements and Hume's argument that we cannot know in advance of experience what the effects of any cause might be.

¹⁵ *Dreams*, 2:326-327, p. 12.

that “animates both itself and also the dead stuff of the universe”, not through contact and impact, but through its inner activity. These immaterial beings are “spontaneously active principles, hence substances and self-subsisting natures.”¹⁶

Taken together, spirits comprise a *mundus intelligibilis* - a self-subsisting whole whose parts stand in reciprocal connection and communication with one another without the mediation of bodies. Even human souls connected to bodies communicate directly with other spirits, although they are not aware of it. Human souls live in two worlds: they exchange representations directly with other spirits outside of space and time, and they communicate with other embodied spirits in space and time through the mediation of sensory impressions.¹⁷

Kant signals his approval of this metaphysical scheme in highly positive terms. “[I]t is as good as demonstrated, or it could easily be proven”, he says, that the human soul shares a community with other spirits and receives impressions directly from them.¹⁸ In support of the theory, he argues that participation in a spiritual kingdom would explain why moral duty is experienced as an absolute imperative.¹⁹

While the connection among spirits explains the possibility of communication between the living and the dead it does not explain how these communications are translated into representations that human beings can understand. Communications between spirits are not directly accessible to human experience, just as sensory experiences are not directly available to pure spirits. A veil of ignorance separates the two. However, if influxes from the spiritual world can trigger corresponding sensory images in the human soul, spirit-seers like Swedenborg may be able to communicate with the dead because of a special sensitivity to the images these influxes provoke.²⁰

¹⁶ *Dreams*, 2:329 [2] pp. 15 - 16. Kant’s description of the soul recalls Plato’s argument for the soul’s immortality in *Phaedrus*, 245 c. and in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates discusses the possibility of life after death.

¹⁷ *Dreams*, 2:332 [5] p. 18. Death in this scheme is nothing more than dropping the accidental form of sensory communication and continuing the direct spiritual communication that already exists.

¹⁸ *Dreams*, 2:333 [6] p, 19.

¹⁹ *Dreams*, 2:333 - 335 [7 - 9]

²⁰ Kant acknowledges that such sensitivities, even if they are based on genuine spiritual influxes, might present some inconveniences to a spirit-seer who might have a difficult time distinguishing spirit-induced experiences from common delusions and whose close contact with the spirit world might interfere with the intelligence necessary to succeed in the material world.

In the third chapter, Kant shifts his tone and addresses his reader in the voice of a psychophysicist explaining how an otherwise rational person might mistake figments of his imagination for external objects. Before he begins he recalls the fragment of Heraclitus -- which he incorrectly attributes to Aristotle -- in which Heraclitus distinguishes between the private world of dreams and the common world shared by people who are awake. Current metaphysicians²¹, he says, live in private dream worlds of their own. Eventually they will wake up and join the rest of the world.

Adopting the language of contemporary science Kant explains the difference between perception of external objects in space and the experience of imaginary objects in the mind. External objects are perceived in space at the point where the rays emanating from them appear to intersect. Objects of the imagination are located within the mind because their point of intersection (the *focus imaginarius*) is situated within the brain. But if, as the result of a brain malfunction, a person locates the point of intersection of an imagined object outside the brain, he is deluded into perceiving it as the object of sensation, not imagination.

The consequence of these considerations, Kant concludes, is to render the speculations of the preceding chapter completely superfluous. An empirical explanation eliminates the need "to lose oneself in the dizzy concepts of a half-creative, half-inferential reason."²² In addition, it eliminates the risk of ridicule. Kant says he would not blame his readers for regarding spirit-seers as candidates for the hospital and ending their investigations at that.²³

In the end, Kant finds neither of these explanations fully satisfactory. The metaphysical explanation takes us into territories beyond all possible human experience, providing no basis for distinguishing truth from fantasy. The psychological explanation has a more solid empirical base, but does not fully explain how, for example, Swedenborg found the receipt in the Count's bureau or sensed a fire burning three hundred miles away. After weighing the pros and cons as objectively as possible, Kant observes that the metaphysical explanation is more attractive to him only because it offers hope for an afterlife. "The reader remains free to judge; but as far as I am concerned at least, the scales are tipped far enough to the side

²¹ He mentions Christian Wolff and Christian August Crusius.

²² *Dreams*, 2:347 - 2:348 [9] p. 34.

²³ He notes ironically that Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* may have solved these riddles already by associating elevated thoughts with a hypochondriacal wind in the gut, which if it passes downward produces a fart; if upward "an apparition or an heavenly inspiration" *Dreams*, 2:348 [9] p. 35.

of the arguments of the second chapter [in favor of metaphysics] to make me earnest and open-minded in giving a hearing to the many strange stories of this kind."²⁴

But in the concluding chapter of the dogmatic part, he takes the opposite tack, professing a complete skepticism about spiritual realities. Insisting that no data can be found in our sensations to provide us with a positive idea of spirit, he says we can understand spirit only negatively. We can know the appearances of life, but we cannot reason our way back to its first principles. Instead, we rely on what we know to be fictions, leaving us in a state of complete ignorance. For this reason Kant resolves to lay aside the whole matter of spirits (which he acknowledges is an extensive part of metaphysics) and confine his "humble faculty of understanding to projects more commensurate with it."²⁵

In the "historical" part of *Dreams*, Kant looks at the empirical evidence in support of Swedenborg's claims. Again he signals his sensitivity to the possibility that he will be mocked simply for discussing them: "One can be sure that an academy of sciences will never make this matter into a prize question," he observes wryly.²⁶ There have always been and will always be "nonsensical things" that find acceptance even among rational men, Kant says, including "spiritual healing, the dowsing rod, precognitions [one of the topics of Bem's article in *JPSP*], the effect of the imagination of pregnant women, and the influences of the lunar cycle on animals and plants."²⁷ Initially the weakness of human reason mixes delusion with truth, but over time the concepts are purified, a small part remains, and "the rest is thrown out with the rubbish."²⁸

As evidence of Swedenborg's psychic powers, Kant relates the same three stories he told in the letter to Charlotte von Knobloch, but leaves out much of the detail that gave them their credibility. He acknowledges the same epistemological dilemma: he can neither doubt nor believe them, and in the end expresses an indifference toward them, leaving it up to the reader to decide.²⁹

²⁴ *Dreams*, 2:350 [2] p. 39.

²⁵ *Dreams*, 2:352 [4] p. 40

²⁶ *Dreams*, 2:353 [1] p. 41.

²⁷ *Dreams*, 2:357 [8] p.44.

²⁸ *Dreams*, 2:357 [8] p. 45.

²⁹ *Dreams*, 2:353 [1] p. 41. One might speculate about why Kant treated Swedenborg's claims more favorably in the letter than in the treatise. Perhaps it is because he had not read Swedenborg's writings at the time he wrote the letter.

Next, Kant describes Swedenborg's account of what he saw and heard in the realm of spirits. Before getting to the task, Kant pauses for a chat with his reader. He acknowledges that his metaphysical account of the spirit world seems to have been constructed with an eye toward Swedenborg's descriptions in the *Arcana*, but asks that his "philosophical brainchild" not be dismissed simply because of its resemblance to Swedenborg's "desperately deformed and foolish" testimony. "[O]ne must suppose that there is more cleverness and truth in Swedenborg's writings than first appearances allow or that it is only by accident that his system coincides with mine...", he observes.³⁰

Kant's account of Swedenborg's visions revisits many of the themes of Kant's metaphysical account of the spirit world: the connectedness of all spirits, the difference between the "inner memory" and external sensation, the manner by which communication takes place between the living and the dead. His attitude toward Swedenborg is markedly ambivalent. He suggests that although his stories have arisen from a "fanatical intuition", they deserve to be collected and studied, observing that illusory observations are more instructive than the illusory arguments commonly found in scholarly journals. He is fairly certain that Swedenborg is not a charlatan, but in the end, he declares himself "tired of transcribing the wild figments of this worst of all enthusiasts,"³¹ concluding that "all this labor comes to nothing in the end."³² His principal objection to Swedenborg's enterprise is his inability to authenticate his stories through any form of shared human experience.³³

In a way, Kant says, he has let down his friends, neither authenticating nor debunking Swedenborg's psychic powers; neither justifying nor refuting a metaphysical system to explain them. But he believes he has done them a more important service by staking out the boundaries of human understanding. Metaphysics, he says, helps us to discern the hidden reasons for things, but in this it is often disappointing. Its more significant advantage (which is "more suited to the nature of the human understanding") is to

³⁰ *Dreams*, 2:359 [1] p. 49.

³¹ *Dreams*, 2:366 [1] p. 55. Kant notes that he has refrained from retelling all the ghost stories in the *Arcana* for fear of distressing his more sensitive readers. Perhaps he had in mind Swedenborg's description of what happens to men who enjoy deflowering virgins: "they appear to themselves to be under the belly of the furious horse, and presently seem to themselves to go through he hinder parts of the horse into his belly; and then suddenly it appears to them as if they were in the belly of a filthy harlot, which harlot is changed into a great dragon, and there they remain wrapped in torment. The punishment returns many times during hundreds and thousands of years, until they are imbued with a horror of such desires." (Vol I, § 828, pp. 385 -386)

³² *Dreams*, 2:366 [11] p. 56.

³³ The proof of Swedenborg's claims, Kant says, requires data from a different world than the one his reader senses. *Dreams*, 2:368 [12] p. 57.

determine the limits of human reason which, Kant says, is like a small country with long borders whose welfare depends more on "knowing and guarding its possessions than blindly pursuing conquests."³⁴

In the final chapter of *Dreams*, Kant takes one more opportunity to state his position. Acknowledging the imperative of science to push its boundaries to the edge of the impossible, he observes that as science matures it eventually comes to accept that there are some things beyond its limits. To achieve this wisdom, it is sometimes necessary to delve into the unnecessary -- even the impossible -- but, "eventually science arrives at the determination of the limits set for it by the nature of human reason; all unfathomable schemes that may not be unworthy in themselves but lie outside of the sphere of mankind fly into the limbo of vanity."³⁵ Questions about spiritual nature, freedom, the future state, and the like are intriguing, but when human reason considers their relationship to human understanding, "the boundaries draw closer together and marker stones are laid that never again allow investigation to wander beyond its proper district."³⁶

On the far side of the markers, beyond the realm of human comprehension, are the "basic concepts of things as causes, of their powers and actions." That I can choose to move my arm, Kant says, is no more intelligible to me than if someone said he could stop the moon in its orbit. From the point of view of reason, they are equally possible and impossible; the only difference is that I have experienced the former, but not the latter.³⁷

This side of the markers there are unexplained phenomena that are subject to empirical investigation -- gravity, for example, or the alleged healing power of magnets. Questions about these phenomena will eventually be answered through empirical observation. This may be the case with the questions raised by Bem's article in the *JPSP*. To the extent that the phenomena under investigation are subject to empirical testing because they are based on observations available to all human enquirers, they do not transcend the limits of human understanding, although they may not yet be proved or understood.³⁸ But experiences like

³⁴ *Dreams*, 2:368 [13] p. 57.

³⁵ *Dreams*, 2:369 [1] p. 59.

³⁶ *Dreams*, 2:370 [1] p. 60. Kant continues this thought by pointing out that the fundamental principles of causation and willing are among those things that lie beyond the realm of human understanding.

³⁷ *Dreams*, 2:370 [1] p. 60.

³⁸ It might be a different matter, however, if investigators like Bem go beyond the use of empirical and statistical methods and attempt to explain paranormal phenomena by invoking theories that are not subject to empirical verification.

those described by Swedenborg can never be verified because they fall outside the “law of sensation accepted by most human beings.” In these cases, Kant concludes, it is advisable to “call it quits.”

Dreams of a Spirit-seer is subject to widely varying interpretations. On the surface it appears to be a mocking and scathing critique of Swedenborg’s claims to communicate with spirits; but read in the context of Kant’s larger body of work, it points to the importance of Swedenborg’s influence on Kant’s mature critical philosophy. Reports of Swedenborg’s psychic powers led Kant to stake out the boundary between legitimate empirical claims and fanciful imaginings of both the metaphysical and pathological variety. Swedenborg’s descriptions of the spirit world helped Kant to imagine a world of pure spirits, distinct from but contingently connected to the world of common human experience. Ludwig Ernst Borowski, a student and friend of Kant who became his first biographer, observed that “every attentive reader finds already here the seeds of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.”³⁹

Kant’s ambivalence toward Swedenborg reveals itself throughout the treatise. Gregory Johnson argues that at least some of this ambivalence was conditioned by Kant’s concern for the religious censors who might look askance at a positive appreciation of such an unorthodox theory. It is apparent too that Kant was concerned to preserve his reputation as a serious scientist, which might be undermined if he gave too much credence to ‘ghost stories’.⁴⁰

It is possible too, that *Dreams* is an elaborate tease.⁴¹ It is filled with mocking and self-deprecating humor, professorial gadgets, and jabs at academic pretension. Its title, the titles of its chapters, even the decorative quotes from classical scholars shout “Do not take this too seriously!” The fate of this little treatise is probably best summed up by Kant’s forecast that it “should leave the reader in a state of complete satisfaction, in which the principal part will not be understood, the other not believed, and the remainder laughed at.”⁴²

³⁹ *The Life and Character of Immanuel Kant*, in *Kant on Swedenborg*, p. 145. One passage Borowski may have had in mind is Kant’s description of the “transcendental hypothesis” that “if we could intuit ourselves and things as they are, we should see ourselves in a world of spiritual beings, our sole and true community...” *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 780, B 808, Norman Kemp Smith translation.

⁴⁰ When he published *Dreams*, Kant was a privatdozent, still unsure of his academic future. He was not appointed Professor until four years later.

⁴¹ Those who find it hard to imagine Kant as a jokester might consider James Collins characterization of Kant as “a quite sociable man, eagerly sought after for dinner parties, because of his witty conversation.” *A History of Modern European Philosophy*, The Bruce Publishing Company, 1954

⁴² *Dreams*, 2:318 [3] p. 4.