

ONE

Introduction

Observations on an extraordinary feat

An extraordinary thing happened . . . in front of a crowd of strangers, a man asked a woman to think of a word. He asked her to concentrate on the word, and then he looked into her eyes. After a moment or two, he began to speak: it was a word of about six or seven letters, a name, no, an object, and there was a T in the middle, no, there were two. There were two Ts in the middle. She nodded. Don't nod, don't give me any feedback, just concentrate. It's a small thing, not so small, but small in a sense. It's alive, it's an animal, it's a pet and it's very cute. You're thinking of a kitten! She stared at the man. The strangers, who had been staring at him, turned to stare at her. They could tell, simply from the expression on her face, that he had read her mind.

Perhaps this was a magic trick, though it is hard to imagine how it could have been done. The woman was asked to think of any word she wanted, and nothing was said or written down. In any case, there was a magician present, and he said that he could not explain how it was done. Some thought it was the result of clever psychological techniques, of reading subtle facial cues. After all, anyone could tell

from her facial expression that the man had read her mind, so perhaps he was able to pick up on more subtle information? However, there was also a psychologist present, and she was certain that psychological techniques could not account for the demonstration. If it was neither trickery nor psychology, then surely, as others thought at the time, this was a genuine paranormal demonstration? Of course, you were not there, and are understandably sceptical. Nevertheless, the description is accurate, since I was there myself, and saw this (with my own eyes, as all competent observers should). You have my word.¹

This is rather typical, in certain respects, of cases of extraordinary (e.g. paranormal) phenomena throughout history. It begins with a reported observation of something for which there seems to be no ordinary (e.g. normal) explanation. Faced with an anomaly, we are forced to consider whether or not it is real. If we are initially sceptical, as everyone claims to be, then we first consider possible ordinary explanations for it. These may be considered in depth, or far too briefly, and some may not be considered at all. Nevertheless, whatever ordinary explanations come to mind, they need to be rejected before an extraordinary conclusion can be reached. That, after all, is what extraordinary (or paranormal) means: beyond the ordinary (or normal). In other words, belief in anything extraordinary depends upon the exclusion of ordinary explanations.

Others, of course, have not believed, and this is always an option. We can always reject the testimony as untrustworthy, as invention or exaggeration of something less impressive. After all, human observation and memory are notoriously unreliable. Or else we can assume that, though what happened was highly improbable, it was nevertheless coincidence. After all, winning the lottery is highly improbable, yet nevertheless happens to somebody every week. Or else we can assume that it was fraud, despite the failure of magicians and psychologists to explain what was going on. After all, magicians and psychologists are only human, limited in knowledge and capable of

being deceived. In choosing one of these options, we might admit that we do not have an adequate explanation, but we can nevertheless believe that one exists. In other words, we can always assume that, though the event is unexplained, it is not inexplicable.

We therefore have a choice between one belief and another. We can believe that the event has no ordinary explanation, or we can believe that it does have one. And the problems of testimony, chance and fraud always make the latter an available option. So why would anyone believe in extraordinary phenomena? This is the question that psychologists have long seen as the one of primary interest in terms of extraordinary beliefs. And yet it has been answered on a regular basis, indeed since before psychologists began to ask the question: people believe because they do not consider the ordinary explanations as adequate ones for the event in question. After all, as in the above case, they are often barely explanations, lacking not only in detail but also in any supporting evidence. This is a point that believers have been making for a very long time, that ordinary explanations are sometimes inadequate, which is why an extraordinary one is sometimes necessary. One need not agree, of course, and people have also disagreed for a very long time, but it hopefully makes the point that disbelief is not a self-evident position. Thus, instead of wondering why people believe, it might be more useful to consider how people come to the conclusions that they do.

This is partly a matter of individual differences, as many psychologists have long stressed, since there are obviously individuals who believe, and individuals who do not. But before we consider individual differences, we need to remember that belief is also a product of social context, since at certain times, and in certain places, almost everyone has accepted the reality of certain extraordinary phenomena. Indeed, what is considered ordinary has varied significantly at different times and places. To take a rather obvious example, mobile phones would have been considered extraordinary by anyone a century ago. Few of us now, of course, truly understand how such things

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work, but we accept that they are ordinary enough because we are used to them, and because we assume that there are others who know how they work, and who could explain it all if necessary. In other words, people believe according to a wider context of plausibility, based upon what they regard as ordinary, and their trust in those they regard as experts (magicians, psychologists, telephone engineers) to be able to explain things.

There is also the matter of the particular event in question, of what is going on *here*? Regardless of any individual or wider social factors, what someone believes depends upon particular events. It is hard to find a single believer past or present who has not declined to believe in some phenomena. Thus, whether or not someone believes depends upon the event in question, and not only for believers but also for disbelievers. After all, any self-respecting sceptic would have to admit that they would accept the reality of certain phenomena, providing the evidence were sufficiently convincing. Indeed, there are countless reports by those who began as sceptics, but became believers, as a result of particular phenomena that they were unable to explain. That, at least, is what they tell us, though the reliability of testimony has been part of the problem. Meanwhile, to put it another way, which is the way it is invariably put by both believers and disbelievers, it depends upon the evidence, and what counts as adequate evidence will always come down to considerations about particular events. Beliefs are always based upon particular events, since to believe in extraordinary phenomena is to believe that certain events have occurred that are extraordinary.

Within particular social contexts, and in relation to particular events, there will also be differences between individuals – some will believe, some will not – and the question of why some people believe is certainly an interesting question, but it is only one of several. If we are to understand belief in extraordinary phenomena, we must consider both belief and disbelief, since the latter is not an absence of belief, but rather the belief that such phenomena are

the result of ordinary processes. We must also consider the social context within which such events took place, since what one makes of an extraordinary phenomenon depends upon what one regards as ordinary. And we must consider the details of the events that are believed to be real, since believers do not believe in just anything.

In the case of the demonstration above, for example, there are several details that made it convincing. The word was freely chosen from millions of possible words. It was not, say, a playing card, which might have been forced, and of which there are only 52. And the word was only thought of, it was not written down, so it is hard to think of any way the man could have known what word was chosen. Furthermore, he could not have divined the word by reading subtle facial cues, since the best this can provide is a reaction to a prompt. For example, if the woman had thought of a letter, and the man had then recited the alphabet, the woman might have reacted when she heard her own letter, thus informing him of what she was thinking. In theory, an entire word could be discovered this way, letter by letter, but it would be a long and tedious process. In any case, this is not what happened. Furthermore, a psychologist was present, and she ruled out psychological techniques, and a magician also saw the trick, and said that he could not explain it. If the choice of word had been restricted, or had been written down, or if neither magicians nor psychologists had been present (or else if they had claimed to know how it was done), then the feat would have been less convincing, and fewer people (if any) would have believed it was paranormal.

The details of the event and the authority of relevant experts are invariably central to the exclusion of ordinary explanations, and have been regularly given as reasons why individuals believe in extraordinary phenomena. Indeed, when we examine particular extraordinary events, and what people make of them, we immediately find reasons for belief and disbelief because, given the opportunity, people tell us. One of the constant themes in the history of extraordinary beliefs has been that people explain why they believe what they do. Ordinary

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beliefs might be held without a second thought, and may be expressed without justification, but extraordinary beliefs demand reasons, and the expression of such beliefs demands that they are given.

It can be said, of course, that these are not the real reasons for belief, that there are underlying (unsaid) reasons, of which those who believe are unaware, such as gullibility or wishful thinking, to which nobody ever admits. This may be so, but we do not need to take the stated reasons at face value for them to be informative. We can reconsider the questions we ask, and the assumptions we make when we attempt to answer them, including the idea that what people say is a reliable route to belief. As we shall see, in doing so, the reasons people give for their beliefs (which, as it happens, include references to gullibility and wishful thinking) can help us understand why extraordinary beliefs have been, and continue to be, so common.

There are several other questions to be considered, however, not only those above but also ones to do with the nature of psychological knowledge, and the ways in which disputing extraordinary phenomena has shaped the way we think and behave. These require a historical approach because they cannot be understood without historical perspective. History allows a wide range of extraordinary phenomena to be considered, which were the objects of both belief and disbelief, and which occurred in different social contexts, at times when what was thought to be ordinary or plausible was quite different from today. History allows us to consider phenomena that were similarly extraordinary in certain respects, yet had different names that carried different meanings, and thus provoked different kinds of belief and disbelief. After all, if we are to understand extraordinary belief, then we need to consider not only the events that have been the objects of belief, but also what has been believed about them. Furthermore, while psychologists have been primarily concerned with why individuals believe in extraordinary phenomena, this itself has a history. By looking back, we can understand not

only why people have believed, but also why this became the key question asked by psychologists.

There is, of course, another obvious question, one that almost everyone asks themselves about an extraordinary phenomenon, such as the one described above: was it 'real'? In this case, at least, the answer is simple: it was a trick witnessed by the author, performed by a fellow magician. The details may be imperfect, since memory is imperfect, but had you been there, you would have seen something very close to what was described. The psychologist could not explain it because it did not rely upon psychological techniques, and the magician who said that he could not explain it said so out of politeness. This is a not uncommon ruse used by magicians when asked about a performance of a fellow magician. The result is that this particular feat remains unexplained, but it is not inexplicable (though you, the reader, have to trust me on this, since I am not about to reveal the secret).

There is one more point worth making now, regarding the distinction between belief and disbelief, the crudeness of which shall later be shown to be problematic in a variety of ways. Meanwhile, however, one might ask: what about those who have no particular beliefs about extraordinary phenomena? In many years of discussing such things, I have never met anyone with no view on the matter. No doubt such folk exist, but an absence of belief is an absence of thought, and could only be found in an individual who had genuinely never considered the matter. And if such an individual does exist, we would not know, unless we asked, at which point they would have to consider the matter. Having considered it, there are some who express the view that they have no particular belief about extraordinary phenomena. If we take that expression at face value (i.e. as what they really think), it is clearly a point of view. We might call it an agnostic, even neutral, position, but it is not an absence of belief, since any position must be taken, and taken in relation to other options. To reject both the belief that such phenomena are

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real, and the belief that they are not, is to reject those beliefs in favour of an alternative (i.e. that they may or may not be real). To be agnostic, or ostensibly neutral, is merely to consider two positions, and then come down somewhere in between. If we treat such expressions of neutrality as representations of a neutral position, then they are based upon a combination of at least some of the pro and con arguments that we shall be examining. On the other hand, avowals of neutrality are not merely representations of internal mental states, but can serve certain social functions. As we shall see, they can be deployed in order to present oneself as a balanced commentator, as one who has no particular axe to grind, even when expressing and warranting less than neutral positions.

For the moment, however, it has been argued that beliefs in extraordinary phenomena depend upon the exclusion of ordinary explanations, and that disbeliefs are simply beliefs that some sort of ordinary explanation is adequate. Thus, we need to consider both beliefs and disbeliefs, that is, beliefs *about* extraordinary phenomena. These are based upon particular events (the objects of belief) and are shaped by the social context in which they occur, which provides a list of plausible explanations (what might be believed about them). This becomes clear when one takes a historical perspective, as even the briefest glances at the past will show.

Some extraordinary beliefs past and present

The term 'extraordinary' has been chosen because we are discussing events that are, and consistently have been, beyond ordinary human experience. Nobody wonders why people believe in gravity (or in the efficacy of mobile phones), since such things are (now) common features of human experience. Yet even spiritualists and psychical researchers, who claim to have witnessed many psychic phenomena, and orthodox Christians, who believe in the reality of biblical miracles, accept that such things are extraordinary; indeed, that is

precisely why they matter to spiritualists, psychical researchers and Christians.

There have long been reports of extraordinary phenomena, but the terms that have been used to describe them have changed. The events in question have been similar in certain respects, yet understood in quite different ways. Continuity can be found in the forms of the phenomena that have been described in various ways. For centuries, things have mysteriously appeared (plagues of locusts, fish and loaves, spirits of the dead), transformed from one thing into another (water into wine, witches into cats, straight spoons into bent spoons), and floated in the air (medieval saints, broomsticks, tables in Victorian drawing rooms). There have always been, or so it has seemed, magical or miraculous cures, exhibitions of clairvoyance, and predictions about the future.

Throughout the last two centuries, the period with which we are concerned, both believers and disbelievers have regularly compared earlier magical and miraculous phenomena to the phenomena associated with mesmerism and spiritualism, and later psychic and paranormal phenomena. That these various forms of extraordinary phenomena were similar in certain respects has been recognized by every generation, as they have been compared and contrasted by those who have found them similarly real or similarly false, or have discriminated between the real and the false. In doing so, however, the categories used, and the meanings associated with them, have been disputed and changed significantly.

It is in these recognized similarities, disputed differences and various understandings that beliefs about extraordinary phenomena can be understood in a way that gets beyond some of our current assumptions about the paranormal. The term 'paranormal' refers to events that are anomalous in terms of current scientific knowledge. This places paranormal phenomena, by definition, outside of orthodox science. This may seem a rather obvious assumption, but there are practical implications of this for understanding paranormal beliefs

today, which shall be considered shortly. For the moment, however, the point is simply that whether such phenomena are considered normal, or incompatible with current scientific knowledge, depends upon the phenomena in question and the historical context in which they reportedly occur. That this is the case today is not always obvious, since we often miss what we take for granted, hence the need for a historical perspective to remind us that it has always been the case.

In seventeenth-century Britain, for example, it was normal to believe in miracles, witchcraft, ghosts and other extraordinary phenomena. Beliefs in ghosts had survived the Reformation, when the rejection of Purgatory had made them homeless, but their obvious link to the existence of the soul had made them indispensable.² Belief in witchcraft and the occult was equally common, and Christian miracles were taken for granted. Even heroes of the scientific revolution, such as Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle, could study alchemy and investigate second sight, could believe in the miracles of the Bible and the truth of the Genesis story of Creation.

It is easy simply to dismiss such beliefs as the product of a more primitive time, a time when early modern folk were incapable of discriminating between the truth and falsity of magic and miracles, but that is not the case. Most took the miracles of the Bible for granted while rejecting other miracles, most obviously those associated with Roman Catholicism, since it was widely understood (by the Protestant majority) that the age of miracles was over. Various extraordinary phenomena were disputed, in terms of their reality and their extraordinariness, as part of a developing discourse of facts within natural philosophy.³ In short, beliefs were evidence-based, but what counted as evidence, as adequate evidence then and there, was based upon different assumptions than at present. Meanwhile, everyone else, from royalty to the lesser sort, could watch the extraordinary feats of jugglers (the term then used to refer to performers of conjuring tricks) without mistaking them for feats of witchcraft.⁴ Of

course, there would have been some people who believed that these tricks were real, but that has always been so, and as we shall see, has remained so ever since.

In other words, even the briefest of glimpses at the period prior to that which concerns us here reveals that beliefs were based upon particular phenomena (certain miracles, certain extraordinary claims, certain magical feats, but not others), and shaped by a social context that provided a sense of what counted as ordinary (in relation to, for example, contemporary science, religion or entertainment).

When we turn to the period with which we are concerned, beginning in the early nineteenth century, we see a different context of plausibility, within which different assumptions and discriminations were made in relation to the extraordinary. Beliefs in witchcraft, once common, were now rare, except in certain rural areas. For the educated, there were already hallucination theories to allow one to believe in ghost experiences, if not in ghosts themselves.⁵ Almost everyone still took the miracles of the Bible for granted, though scholars were already questioning the validity of some of them.⁶ And when one saw a conjuror, the term that had now replaced 'juggler', performing ostensibly magical feats, it was clearer than ever before that his feats were merely trickery.⁷ For the majority of modern people, witchcraft, ghosts and other superstitions were now relegated to the past, and beliefs in them associated with primitive thinking. Meanwhile, the miracles of the Bible could be believed without seeing, and the extraordinary feats of conjurors could be seen without believing.

For all the Victorian talk about the rise of science and rational thinking, and later characterizations of the modern world as 'disenchanted', things were never so simple.⁸ So far as the modern world was accompanied by a new norm of disbelief, this was only in relation to certain kinds of extraordinary phenomena. As magic and witchcraft were consigned to the primitive past, or to parts of the contemporary world deemed primitive, and as a special

case was constructed for the miracles of the Bible, new kinds of extraordinary phenomena began to appear. The phenomena associated with mesmerism and spiritualism were observable by anyone who took the time to look, and what became known as 'psychic' and 'paranormal' phenomena are with us still, as objects of belief and disbelief, having been taken seriously by many educated and scientific folk. And, as people have continued to believe in extraordinary phenomena, even though they are supposed to know better, so historians and psychologists have provided explanations for this.

Historians have tended to understand such beliefs in terms of wider religious, scientific and social concerns. For example, spiritualism has been seen as a response to increasing doubts about Christian faith in the wake of emerging scientific knowledge, and psychical research as a surrogate faith that satisfied spiritual, philosophical and empirical needs.⁹ The interests of scientists in such phenomena have been understood in terms of other contemporary scientific discourse and practices, whereby individual scientists regarded such phenomena as compatible with related natural phenomena and, therefore, not so extraordinary after all.¹⁰ More broadly, they have been understood, to varying degrees and in all manner of ways, in terms of the radical social and cultural changes that characterized the emergence of modern industrial Britain, as individuals and groups negotiated status and authority, and as part and parcel of broader cultural shifts in how modern people saw themselves and their world.¹¹

Understandably, the primary focus of such studies has been on the relationship of interest in such phenomena to various intellectual, social, cultural and scientific topics, from faith and secularism, to class and gender, to literature, technology and expertise. But so far as they have suggested explanations for belief, they have generally done so in terms of individuals' desire to believe, the social function of belief-related practices, and the compatibility of such beliefs with wider cultural views and scientific knowledge. These are all relevant

reasons, of course, but not necessarily the ones of primary importance to those who expressed beliefs about such phenomena. Indeed, when one examines how people expressed their beliefs, one finds that there is an overwhelming stress upon the primacy of the evidence: in short, that less extraordinary explanations were simply inadequate to account for what had been observed. The extraordinary phenomena associated with (indeed, which were the very basis of) mesmerism, spiritualism, psychical research and parapsychology have always been defended and disputed in this way.

For the most part, the matter of evidence has been side-stepped by academic historians who have been more interested in understanding why such phenomena were of interest to people at the time, rather than simply dismissing them as examples of pseudo-scientific thinking, as some earlier historians tended to do.¹² However, if we wish to understand such beliefs, then we need to consider in rather more detail the views of believers and disbelievers, and that means examining the events about which beliefs have been held, as well as what has been believed about them. Historians have not done this in depth because they have been primarily concerned with matters other than belief per se, such as wider theoretical debates about science or modernity. Psychologists, however, have been directly concerned with trying to explain such beliefs. Indeed, the psychology of belief was itself a product of the nineteenth-century disputes about extraordinary phenomena, and its current form emerged from more recent disputes about the paranormal. Its very existence and form has a history and, as we shall see, a historical perspective reveals that the form of enquiry and the object of enquiry have been inextricably linked.

But this is not only a historical enquiry, it is also a psychological one, which seeks not only to explain why we examine beliefs in the way that we do, but also to provide an alternative way of understanding extraordinary beliefs themselves. In order to do so, we need to consider the limits of current psychological methods, and in

particular the fact that they do not adequately consider either the objects of belief, or what is believed about them.

Understanding paranormal beliefs

Beliefs are generally understood as propositional attitudes. To take a classic example, belief that it is raining is an attitude (belief) towards a proposition (it is raining). People may believe that it is raining, or they may believe that it is not, but nobody talks about belief in rain. 'Belief in' is reserved for things the existence of which is somewhat dubious. People believe in unicorns, but not in horses, they believe in witches, but not in watches. Of course, 'belief in' the existence of something is 'belief that' the thing exists, but some beliefs are less obvious than others. Thus, one might implicitly believe that watches exist without so much as a conscious thought, but belief that witches exist requires (in our time and place) some consideration. In other words, whatever the nature of certain implicit beliefs, extraordinary beliefs are like what Daniel Dennett calls 'opinions', dependent upon language, and upon some sort of decision about the truth of sentences.¹³

As a propositional attitude, belief in the paranormal is the belief that paranormal phenomena exist, this being the proposition ('paranormal phenomena exist') towards which an attitude is taken. An advantage of translating 'belief in the paranormal' to 'belief that paranormal phenomena exist' is that it reminds us that we are talking about beliefs relating to certain phenomena that are classed as paranormal. But it does not get to the heart of the matter unless we consider the phenomena in question, and what is meant by 'paranormal', not only according to psychologists but also to those whose beliefs we seek to understand. After all, if believers do not believe what we think they believe, then we are failing to understand their beliefs.