

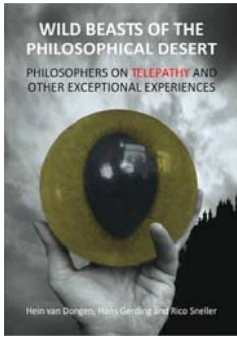
BOOK REVIEW

Wild Beasts of the Philosophical Desert: Philosophers on Telepathy and Other Exceptional Experiences by Hein van Dongen, Hans Gerding, and Rico Sneller. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014. 176 pp. + xii. \$59.59 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1443854535.

This slender and interesting volume by three Dutch philosophers examines the manner in which eight prominent philosophers dealt with ostensibly paranormal experiences arising both spontaneously and also as the result of hypnosis. Hans Gerding covers both Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer; Rico Sneller discusses Friedrich Joseph Schelling, Hans Driesch, and Gabriel Marcel; and Hein van Dongen considers William James, Henri Bergson, and Jacques Derrida.

My guess is that *JSE* readers might already know about Kant's apparent ambivalence (or perhaps just change of heart) about Swedenborg's vision of a Stockholm fire (and his other reported experiences), as well as William James's investigations of mental mediumship (Mrs. Piper in particular) and his experiments with altered states. Nevertheless, I expect they will find much that they didn't already know in those chapters, as well as in the other chapters.

Interestingly (and perhaps surprisingly), the authors decline to take any stand on whether psi phenomena are genuine (although the philosophers they survey are often quite clear and positive on that score),¹ and they also refrain from judging the adequacy of the theoretical claims made by the philosophers they portray. Their avowed interest is in describing the philosophers' distinctive relationships with exceptional human experiences and the impact that had on their respective philosophies. That's fine, but I'm less happy with the authors' stated justification for withholding judgment on whether they believe any psi phenomena are genuine. In their view, it's important to be open to the "complexity and equivocality of our existence" (p. 8), which from their various other comments I understand to be a call to tolerate more humility and uncertainty in empirical knowledge claims. That's fine as well. But they claim that an impediment to achieving that openness would be to focus "on an artificial contrast between the ruling worldview and the anomalies that do not seem to fit" (p. 8). Now first, I don't see that this contrast is at all artificial in any way that justifies omitting it from consideration. Granted, the prevailing scientific worldview is a human



construct, but it's undeniable that there is a widely prevalent, politically potent, and psi-unfriendly received vision about how the world works. Ignoring that worldview, presumably because it's a human invention, seems as pointless as ignoring the man-made skyscraper your car is about to plow into. And second, I suppose it should surprise no one that as *JSE* Editor-in-Chief I see great value in focusing precisely on the contrast between received scientific theories and their corresponding anomalies, both in encouraging the open-mindedness for which the

authors of this book strive, and for gaining a deeper understanding of the psychology and sociology of science and philosophy.

But my main regret about this book is that it gives little attention to Anglo-American philosophy apart from James. For example, C. D. Broad dealt in great detail (and considerable sophistication) over several decades with parapsychological research (see, e.g., Broad 1953, 1962, 1967 and my review of Broad 1962 in the previous issue of *JSE*).² The same could be said about Henry Sidgwick, C. J. Ducasse, H. H. Price, and arguably even Antony Flew. Perhaps the authors considered none of these figures to be in the same league philosophically as those they considered (if so, I'd disagree). But that surely can't be said about C. S. Peirce, James's colleague and the originator of American Pragmatism, who had at least as much engagement with parapsychological phenomena and research as some of the philosophers covered in this book (for more on Peirce's engagement with the paranormal, see Braude 1998).³

One very curious feature of the book is that all 554 of its footnotes are collected together at the end of the book. Presumably someone thought that was a good idea, but I don't see why. Personally, I would have at least liked to see the footnotes separated into groups corresponding to the chapters in which they appeared, or (even better) collected at the end of each chapter.

In any case—and although I doubt anyone can make Schopenhauer's philosophy intelligible⁴—the authors do an admirable job of summarizing complex philosophical positions, not to mention the sometimes equally complicated evolution of those positions. And I commend the authors for digging so sensitively, boldly, and thoroughly into what many would regard as the darkest corners of their subjects' thinking. So although the book is probably targeted for a rather specialized audience (even more so than that of the *JSE*), it's informative and interesting, and can be warmly recommended.

Notes

- ¹ For example, Schopenhauer bluntly states: “Whoever at the present time doubts the facts of animal magnetism and its clairvoyance should be called not a sceptic but an ignoramus” (Schopenhauer, 2000:229).
- ² In fact, he also wrote about Kant and Swedenborg (in Broad 1953).
- ³ Although James claimed that his pragmatic view was that of Peirce, it actually modified Peirce’s view in significant ways.
- ⁴ However, Hans Gerding heroically and quite successfully lays out the various strands of his thinking.

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