

### JOHN BELOFF, 1920-2006

John Beloff will most probably be judged by history to have been the most influential British parapsychologist of the 20th century. This is no small achievement for any individual, but especially so for a man of John's extreme modesty; indeed, he would undoubtedly have argued against this description of his contributions. Nonetheless, while his scholarly philosophical writings may prove to be his most enduring academic legacy, his experimental work was often pioneering, and he secured a place for parapsychology within the Psychology Department of Edinburgh University and, in so doing, laid the foundations for the subsequent establishment of the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at Edinburgh. The Koestler Chair in turn has led to the presence of parapsychologically-trained academics within an increasing number of British universities.

Born in London in 1920, John was the fourth of five children and the younger of two sons of a family of successful Russian Jewish immigrants who settled in London before the outbreak of the First World War. At the behest of his parents, John initially studied to be an architect. Service in the Second World War interrupted his studies, but he was invalided out in 1942 and finished his architecture training in 1946. He then took an apprenticeship with an architecture firm, but early on realised that this was not the best path for him to follow.

A turning point leading in his career change was his introduction to parapsychology, brought on by his reading in 1942 of the influential work by J. B. Rhine, *Extrasensory Perception* (1934; Boston: Boston Society for Psychic Research). This book, and other psychological works read by John while still in the army, led him to study psychology and philosophy, initially on a part-time basis at Birkbeck College, University of London, and then as a full-time student at University College, where he graduated in 1952. This same year, he married a fellow student at Birkbeck, Halla, with whom he had two children, Zoe and Bruno. Halla, a respected social psychologist in her own right, remained the most important person in his life throughout their long and productive marriage.

After finishing their degrees, both John and Halla took positions at the University of Illinois, where they studied personality under Raymond Cattell. John then accepted a lecturing post in psychology at Queen's University in Belfast in 1954. It was here that he obtained his PhD in 1956 for research in the area of visual perception, with Halla obtaining her PhD the same year. John remained at Queen's until both he and Halla were offered lecturing posts in the Psychology Department of the University of Edinburgh, which they took up in the winter of 1963. John remained at Edinburgh for the rest of his career. John's interest in parapsychology and the philosophy of mind were inseparable. Throughout his academic career, he was convinced of the reality of paranormal phenomena (or 'psi'), such as extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK). This conviction was not due to any personal experience — indeed, he lamented the lack of such — but rather to his unwaveringly intellectually-honest evaluation of literature that included controlled experimentation as well as examinations of spontaneous-case collections, studies of mediums and field investigations. Similarly, he was committed to the philosophy of classical Cartesian or 'radical' dualism, where mind and body are seen as distinct, and mind is held to be the active agent in causing behaviour and conscious

experience. This perspective stemmed from his belief in free will and a continuous self, and in the occurrence of psi phenomena, which he thought by definition could not be explained by the mechanical workings of the brain or nervous system. In short, he thought parapsychology could provide the proof for his philosophical perspective.

This intertwined relationship is clearly demonstrated by his first book, *The Existence of Mind* (1962), which focused on the philosophy of mind, with the last chapter being dedicated to the paranormal. In this book, he argued against the then popular doctrine of 'analytical behaviourism', favouring instead a strong dualist approach. In the last chapter John developed his argument that only paranormal phenomena could provide the kind of indisputable, empirical evidence of the autonomy of mind required by the philosophy of radical dualism. This book attracted the attention of some of the leading thinkers of the time, including Karl Popper, John Eccles, and A. J. Ayer. Also, it served to bring him to the notice of the day's leading parapsychologist, J. B. Rhine, who invited him to visit his laboratory in Durham, North Carolina and encouraged him to continue his writings on the topic.

His second book, *Psychological Sciences* (1973), also included a chapter on parapsychology. Here he argued that psychology was a multifaceted conglomeration of related sciences, of which parapsychology was one. This was followed in 1974 by a volume John edited, *New Directions in Parapsychology*, for which the well-known author Arthur Koestler wrote the 'Afterword'. His other books include *The Case for Dualism* (co-authored with John R. Smythies, 1989) and *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (1993), as well as chapters in numerous other books. While John retained a conviction of the reality of psi phenomena, he always scrutinised his perspectives and the limits that could be imposed upon psi phenomena. John's book, *The Relentless Question: Reflections on the Paranormal* (1990), provides a selection of his essays that offers an excellent overview of his informed and forthright approach to the questions that drove his philosophical thinking.

While John would downplay the significance of his experimental work, he was nonetheless an insightful experimentalist, and his work often provided early signals of what would become key trends in future parapsychological experimental research. Additionally, his work often capitalised on new technological advances. Thus, in 1961, while still at Queen's, he and Leonard Evans conducted the first PK experiments on atomic particles. Foretelling the importance of truly random sources in future experimental parapsychology research and lighting the way for later PK researchers, this study used a Geiger-counter to measure the rate of radiation disintegration of radioactive particles (uranyl nitrate crystals) to explore whether a person could influence the rate of radioactive decay. While this is probably his most frequently cited work, it obtained null results — a common feature of John's experimental forays. Nonetheless, this work highlighted the importance of what came to be known as 'labile systems' in PK experimentation, and led the way for future experimenters who adapted this procedure to use radioactive decay as a truly random source in RNG-PK studies.

Other 'future trends' identified by John's experimental work included ESP training research and the utilisation of psychophysiological responses as measures of psi interactions. At Edinburgh, with Ian Mandleberg, John first attempted a validation of the 'Ryzl technique' for training high-scoring

ESP subjects (1966). In this painstaking study, using Ryzl's five-stage hypnotic training procedure, they worked with 20 participants over a ten-week period. Using six different ESP tests, the authors conservatively and cautiously concluded that the replication was not successful, despite some significant outcomes. The following year, again with Mandleberg, he attempted a validation of Rhea White's four-stage ESP training model, 'the waiting technique'. This technique was derived from accounts of the subjective state of apparently gifted psychics describing how they received ESP information. This training study again required substantial efforts on the part of the two experimenters and their ten participants, with each participant taking part in a one-hour training session every week for approximately five months. While this study again failed to obtain significant outcomes, it was a forerunner of future training work conducted by Charles Tart in the USA, and by later experimenters working for the Koestler Chair at Edinburgh.

John was among the first to use psychophysiological responses as a direct measure of psi, as opposed to simply using autonomic activity as a correlate of conscious responses to psi targets. John, with his colleagues Cowles and Bates (1970), adopted the use of galvanic skin responses (GSR) in a study examining a receiver's autonomic responses to emotive target material being viewed by an agent. GSR was chosen over what was then the most commonly used psychophysiological measure, the plethysmograph, on account of its being a more sensitive measure of emotion. This study again failed to reach significance, but is an early example of what developed into dominant experimental approaches, namely the DMILS studies and the use of emotive target materials.

John's other experimental work included one of the first studies to explore the effects of having emotionally-bonded receiver—sender pairs in ESP studies (the 'sweetheart' study; Beloff, 1969). He was the first parapsychologist to use an automated ESP tester with a built-in electronic RNG (Beloff & Regan, 1969). And he also broke new ground in an investigation of the impact of brain injury on ESP performance with receivers suffering from Parkinson's disease being tested either before or after stereotactic surgery (Smythies & Beloff, 1965). Despite these promising innovations, however, his experimental work rarely produced any evidence of psi.

But perhaps his most important contribution to experimental parapsychology was via the PhD students that he trained. His students include some of the key psi researchers of the past 30 years, among them Richard Broughton and Adrian Parker. He instilled in all his students the highest respect for scientific integrity, including a dispassionate respect for data. He was interested in 'process' over 'proof' and taught his students to design studies where null results would be as informative as significant outcomes. An accomplished methodologist, John imparted respect for the importance of methodological rigour in his students. He had a remarkably vast knowledge and understanding of the parapsychology literature, and this enabled him to support the wide diversity of topics that his students chose to pursue. Indeed, his knowledge was so all-encompassing that his students affectionately (and respectfully!) referred to him as a 'walking library'.

As a supervisor John was supportive but not directive, allowing his students to pursue their interests and explore wide-ranging topics, while he kept a watchful eye on their progress, from a distance. He would suggest

approaches, but not insist that they be followed. While John would typically try to dissuade prospective students from pursuing a PhD based on parapsychological research, citing the lack of employment opportunities for parapsychologists, if they persisted John would typically give them a chance to succeed, accepting them on the basis of their interest in the field as much as for their academic backgrounds. John largely taught his students by example. He always adopted a rationalist approach—logic and reason were his constant guides. He demonstrated the utmost importance of intellectual honesty in approaching one's own work and that of others. He always dealt with others, including opponents, in a respectful manner without hastily or harshly passing judgement. He was a man of tremendous moral integrity and illustrated to his students the importance of good character by always behaving in a courteous and polite manner. He epitomised fair-mindedness and was always inclusive and generous to others, giving due consideration to rival ideas and philosophies, regardless of their current popularity. Always a humble and extremely modest man, he taught his students to leave their egos 'at the door'—an important lesson when working in a controversial area. Given these attributes, it is little wonder that he inspired great affection and respect in those who knew him.

Arguably John's most significant service to parapsychology was in increasing its representation in a growing number of academic institutions. He did this by creating the foundations that gave rise to the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology, the first academic chair dedicated to this topic in Britain. In 1983 Arthur Koestler committed suicide with his wife, Cynthia, and the entirety of their estate was left to fund the establishment of a Chair for Parapsychology at a British university. A clear measure of the esteem in which John was held by the famous author and his wife is demonstrated by his being nominated as one of the four executors of their will. The choice of John for this pivotal role was undoubtedly influenced by several factors: firstly, for over a decade John and Arthur had been involved in conversations about parapsychology and its potential significance in understanding ourselves and the world in which we live, as witnessed by Arthur's contribution to one of John's books — indeed, one could question whether the bequest would have been made without these exchanges; additionally, the Koestlers committed suicide because of terminal illness, and John had been a strong supporter of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of Scotland; also, John's work had clearly demonstrated not only the viability of pursuing this topic within a university environment, but also the importance of educating the next generation of parapsychologists. John was the only parapsychologist among the will's executors and he took a leading role in determining which university would be awarded the Chair.

While some universities were reluctant to establish a Chair in this area, there was one that had no such concerns: given the work John had done over the past two decades within the Psychology Department, it was not surprising that Edinburgh University was keen to accept the Koestler bequest. But John's influence did not stop here. He was asked to become a member of the Chair's selection team and played an influential role in choosing the successful candidate, Robert Morris. Under Morris's leadership, the Koestler Chair established a successful research group and, according to Bernard Carr in his obituary of Morris in the January 2005 issue of this *Journal*, Morris supervised 32 PhD students, many of whom have since gone on to work at other European universities, where they in

turn are continuing the ever-expanding research-student-training tradition so ably started by John. If parapsychology continues to be increasingly represented within British universities, this success will be largely due to John.

Service to the key organisations of the field was another aspect of John's career. He was elected to the Council of the Society of Psychical Research in 1964, a role that he held for the rest of his life. Also in 1964, he delivered the banquet address at the annual convention of the Parapsychological Association (PA), held at Oxford University. He was elected to serve as the President of the SPR in 1974 and was twice elected to serve as the PA President, in 1972 and then a decade later in 1982, when he presided over a joint PA and SPR conference that celebrated both the Centenary of the SPR's founding and the Silver Jubilee of the PA Convention. He was the Editor of this *Journal* and of the Society's *Proceedings* for a seventeen-year period starting in 1982. He was held in great respect by the field he helped develop and define. Thus in 1997 he was awarded the Myers Medal—the highest honour bestowed by the SPR—and in 2000, in celebration of his accomplishment, a conference to mark his 80th birthday was held in his honour at Edinburgh. Then in 2003 he was awarded the PA Lifetime Achievement Award.

In many respects, John was the epitome of an honourable man. He followed where logic led him, despite the unfashionable nature of some of his ideas. He was undaunted by his inability to acquire first-hand experience of the phenomena he believed in, or to produce significant outcomes in his own experimental work. He bequeathed his body to the medical school at Edinburgh University, specifying that it was to be used for dissection purposes, thereby remaining true to his dualist philosophy. If the next generation of parapsychologically-trained researchers and academics that John helped create can strive to conduct their work in a similarly fair, knowledgeable, courageous and honest manner, then the field should have a very bright and healthy future.

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