

LONG SHADOW OVER PSYCHICAL RESEARCH:  
AN ESSAY REVIEW OF JOHNSON'S *KANT ON  
SWEDENBORG: DREAMS OF A SPIRIT-SEER*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Kant's writings still cast a shadow over the intellectual acceptability of psychical research, and require close scrutiny on that account. The issues have a focus in Kant's relatively early work, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766), which concentrates unfavourably on the writings of Swedenborg and paranormal experience. Kant admitted that his mind was "conflicted" over the acceptability of Swedenborg and the paranormal, and that the tone in *Dreams* was "ambiguously expressed". Examination suggests that this "ambiguity" is more accurately seen as duplicity. In *Dreams* Kant believed that "human reason" sets the limits or "proper district" for scientific investigation, yet he limited the capacity of human reason to customary states of life. All observation is brought under the rule of conventional concepts of space and time, and paranormal phenomena are then dismissed as "nonsensical things", as he termed them. In subjugating experience to a line of reason that requires bringing observations under conventional "rule" or "laws", Kant had no safeguard against the naïve dismissal of paranormal phenomena, despite his development of a "critical" philosophy. Such proscriptions based on ignorance and prejudice posing as "human reason" are still a burden to ground-breaking areas of science such as psychical research.

## ON STEPPING OUT OF LINE

The story of how the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) responded to the life and work of the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) might seem of little relevance to psychical research; merely a side issue in the rather remote intellectual concerns of the mid to late eighteenth century. Yet it could be said that Kant's writings still cast a shadow over the acceptability of psychical research in mainstream Western thinking, and require close scrutiny on that account. Moreover, the story of Kant's response still has relevance to the aspiring parapsychologist. At the age of forty-two, Kant may be seen as a maturing intellectual eager to explore what the world has to show him. There is a powerful Establishment in place that will launch withering attacks on him if he steps out of the accepted line. His career will be put in jeopardy. Among the proscribed areas is the life and work of someone who describes conversations with spirits, and who elaborates a world-view based on his encounters. Kant is intrigued, even impressed, but what does he do if he hopes to secure a university position at the heart of the Establishment? His solution: in public he will ridicule the deviant Swedenborg, but in private he will acknowledge

<sup>1</sup> KANT ON SWEDENBORG: DREAMS OF A SPIRIT-SEER AND OTHER WRITINGS edited by Gregory R. Johnson, translated by G. R. Johnson and Glenn A. Magee. Swedenborg Foundation, West Chester, Pennsylvania, 2002. xxvi + 214 pp. \$19.95 (softcover).

that there is a lot to this deviant's ideas, and even incorporate them into his own thinking.

This is Johnson's interpretation of the story behind Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* of 1766, an overtly scornful attack on Swedenborg written when Kant had little money and no secure academic appointment. There is a ring of familiarity about Kant's device in our own times. In this century, a similar aspirant would be confronted by an Establishment centred on dogmatic materialism, just as prone to punish those stepping out of line. It might seem unlikely that the aspirant would publish his attack anonymously, as Kant did, but Johnson's ample documentation shows that Kant's colleagues knew well enough who the author of *Dreams* was.

The purpose of Johnson's book is "to provide the reader with the materials necessary to draw his or her own conclusions" about this strange case. The provision is generous. There is a new translation of *Dreams* comprising 63 pages, followed by 42 pages of selections from letters, lectures and other writings of Kant, and 32 pages of excerpts from letters by other authors and contemporary reviews. This is followed by 49 pages of copious notes, and a comprehensive index. Combined with an incisive introduction, this is a notable work of scholarship, and essential reading for anyone investigating the vicissitudes of psychical research and its precursors in conventional Western thinking.

#### THE CASE OF THE CONFUSING LETTER

While it is valuable to have a fresh translation of *Dreams*, the reader may well be more intrigued by the correspondence and other documents that Johnson adds to Kant's essay. There is the key letter written by Kant to a lady of his acquaintance, Charlotte von Knobloch. General opinion holds that it was written before the publication of the scathing *Dreams*. It records receiving reliable reports of cases in which Swedenborg purportedly gained highly evidential information from deceased persons; it also reports an event that Kant believed had "the greatest evidential force of all and really deprives all conceivable doubt of excuse". This is the famous account of Swedenborg's perception of a fire in Stockholm while he was some 420 km away. "What can one offer against the credibility of his occurrence?" Kant asked. What he offered, according to general opinion, were insinuations in *Dreams* that these were stories "spread around" and "with no other guarantee than common hearsay, which is quite dubious proof". These accounts, seen as of "the greatest evidential force" in the von Knobloch letter, are "fairy tales that a rational man hesitates to hear with patience" in *Dreams*. Johnson adopts the currently accepted date of 1763 for the letter, three years before *Dreams* appeared, and believes that *Dreams* was Kant's "deliberate attempt to conceal his interest in and affinities to Swedenborg beneath the mask of ridicule and irony". Kant's strategy may even be seen as a deliberate undermining of the credentials of the author: Swedenborg is introduced in *Dreams* as "a certain Herr Schwedenberg [sic] without office or employment". At the time, Swedenborg was indeed "without office or employment", but did Kant really not know that he was retired, with a reputation as an eminent scientist and statesman? Was this an all too familiar strategy followed by the debunking skeptic?

Broad (1949) commented on what he supposed to be a rapid change in Kant's attitude in the presumed three years between the "rather strongly favourable" private letter to von Knobloch and the "decidedly sneering and condescending" tone in *Dreams*, written for public consumption. The idea of this sequence hangs chiefly on the circumstantial evidence that Charlotte von Knobloch married in 1764, yet Kant addressed her as Fraulein; therefore the letter must predate 1766 when *Dreams* was published. There is in fact no generally accepted direct documentary evidence about the date of this letter. It was first published in 1804, and the date attached to it then by Kant's early biographer, Ludwig Borowski, was 1758. All commentators agree that internal evidence makes the date impossibly early. Yet if the letter was written after *Dreams*, then a very different picture emerges from the one presented by Johnson and Broad. It is the picture presented by Swedenborg's biographer William White (1867), who estimated the date of the letter to be 1768, not 1758. This way round, Kant is seen in the letter to reconsider the whole situation presented in *Dreams* after obtaining good evidence of Swedenborg's supernormal abilities, as described in the von Knobloch letter. It makes sense of a statement in Kant's *Metaphysics LI*, contained in Johnson's book and dated two to four years after the publication of *Dreams*. Kant wrote, "The thought of Swedenborg on this matter is quite sublime. He says: the spirit world composes a special real universe; this is the *mundus intelligibilis* [intelligible world], from which this *modo sensibilii* [sensible world] must be distinguished." This does suggest that Kant was rethinking the whole matter after his rough treatment of Swedenborg in *Dreams*.

Most other facts to do with events surrounding this case fall into coherent place if a later dating of the von Knobloch letter is accepted, especially an important remark in Kant's letter stating he had been told that Swedenborg "would go to London in May of this year, where he would publish his book in which the answer to every point of my letter is supposed to be found". This can only refer to Swedenborg's visit to London that resulted in the publication of *De Commercio Animae et Corporis* (*The Interaction of the Soul and the Body*) in 1769. This short work can readily be seen as Swedenborg's "answer to every point" that Kant evidently had raised in a letter now lost, since it is clearly addressed to someone who would be familiar with the state of philosophy in the mid-eighteenth century. There seems to be no record of whether Kant read *De Commercio* and what he made of it, although his finding Swedenborg's thought to be "quite sublime", noted above, might be a reflection of this reading.

Granted that Kant used the word 'Fraulein' in his letter, suggesting a pre-1764 date, its opening does indicate a delay in his responding to her request for information about Swedenborg, since he "deemed it necessary to collect complete information on this matter beforehand". This could have taken some time, during which his correspondent might have married without his knowledge. Against this is an indication in a letter written in 1766 to the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn that he had carried out "prying enquiries into Schwedenberg's visions", and that he would never have peace "until I had disposed of all these anecdotes", as he attempted to do in *Dreams* of 1766. Were these the same anecdotes that Kant wrote so glowingly about to Charlotte von Knobloch? He admitted in his letter to Mendelssohn that his mind was "conflicted" over the

"stories" about Swedenborg: "I can't shake a little affection for tales of this kind, just as regarding their rational basis, I can't rid myself of some suspicion of their correctness." It seems hardly possible to follow Kant's twists and turns.

Not surprisingly, *Dreams* puzzled Kant's contemporaries. In a review included in Johnson's book, Mendelssohn wrote, "The joking pensiveness with which this little work is written leaves the reader sometimes in doubt as to whether Herr Kant intends to make metaphysics laughable or spirit-seeing credible." He nevertheless did grant that "it includes the seeds of weighty considerations, several new thoughts on the nature of the soul, as well as several objections to the well-known systems that deserve a serious-minded exposition". In his letter about *Dreams* to Mendelssohn, Kant admitted that the tone of *Dreams* was "ambiguously expressed", and that he saw a need to "clothe my thoughts so as not to expose myself to mockery". This apparent damaging of Swedenborg's reputation to protect his own back may make one wonder about Kant's professed concern with moral imperatives. Whatever the dating of the von Knobloch letter may be, the existing evidence suggests that Kant's admitted ambiguity is more accurately seen as duplicity.

#### KANT AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

Johnson does not deal explicitly with the implications for psychical research of the Kant-Swedenborg affair. Yet his collection of Kant's output in addition to *Dreams* offers an exceptional opportunity to explore Kant's contorted thinking on this topic. In the von Knobloch letter he wrote that "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 spirit still known to us?), but rather because on the whole it is not sufficiently proved." He noted "many difficulties" such as "so many exposed frauds and such ease of being defrauded". This, he wrote, "is the position in which my mind stood for a long time, until I made the acquaintance of the stories concerning Herr Swedenborg". There follows the reporting of Swedenborg's achievements, with the wish "that I could have questioned this remarkable man myself". But the letter ends with no clear statement about "the judgement that I might venture to pass on so slippery a matter".

This may have been followed by a reading of Swedenborg's *De Commercio* and finding his thoughts "quite sublime", but subsequently he rounded on what he termed Swedenborg's "mystical intuition", namely "the faculty to see things that are not objects of experience; e.g., the notion of spirits that are in community with us" (*Fragment of a Later Rational Theology* between 1789 and 1791). Swedenborgians might well reply that spirits were indeed "objects of experience" for Swedenborg, and psychical research has shown that the "notion of spirits" is at least approachable by scientific investigation. But Kant's dismissive attitude at this time appears in another declaration:-

All spirit-apparitions are of the kind that we can neither set up experiments nor precisely observe and inspect them, and it thus allows reason no further employment here at all. All apparitions of spirits and ghosts, all dream interpretations, precognitions of the future, presentiments and the like are most objectionable because they cannot be brought under any rule."  
[*Metaphysics* LII, 1790-1791]

Since psychical research has been able to set up experiments, precisely

observe, and allow reason employment, clearly there was something wrong with Kant's assessment, even if one were to grant that psychical research has not yet succeeded in bringing its observations under much definitive rule. This is a widespread shortcoming among the sciences, not beyond experimentation, observation and reason to address.

In his relatively early work Kant did admit to Mendelssohn that his mind was "conflicted" over the Swedenborg issue and the paranormal, yet he was far from proof against entering into lengthy speculations about the interaction of spirit and matter. The first chapter of *Dreams* circles round the question: if there is "a cubic foot of space which is full of matter, would it be necessary for a simple element of matter to vacate its place so that the spirit could occupy it?" And if other spirits arrive, would the space become "filled with spirits, the cluster of which would resist just as well through impenetrability as if it were full of matter?" These conjectures expose Kant's basic presupposition that everything real and philosophically admissible must have location in this world, an idea with which parapsychologists committed to a one-space idea are still encumbered, wondering how an immaterial body can occupy a location in physical space (Poynton, 2001). With no solution to this problem at hand, Kant still speculated on where one's thinking 'I' is in the body. "Where I feel, there I am . . . When my corn aches, I feel the painful impression not in a brain nerve but at the end of my toe . . . *My soul is wholly in my whole body, and wholly in each of its parts.*" (Kant's italics.) Finally, he affirms "the existence of immaterial natures in the world, and to place my own soul in the class of these beings". His reason for this "is very obscure to myself". How this unity comes about, and how any interaction operates, is "beyond my understanding".

In the second chapter of *Dreams*, a distinction is made between "the existence of immaterial beings, the characteristic causal laws of which are called *pneumatic*, and, insofar as corporeal beings are the mediating causes of their effects in the material world, *organic*". Evidently this distinction still does not lead him away from a one-space-only conception, even though he contemplates both a material world and "a great whole that one can call the immaterial world (*mundus intelligibilis* [intelligible world]). One may think of similarities with Plotinos at this point, although elsewhere Kant wrote of "the whole delusion of the Neoplatonic philosophers". (Volkmann *Metaphysics*, 1784-1785). At any rate, he went on to write of "a great totality of the immaterial world, an immense but unknown hierarchy of beings and active natures through which alone the dead stuff of the corporeal world is animated". If this sounds like "mysticism" in Swedenborgian grandeur, one soon finds that it is nothing but an Aunt Sally: the next chapter presents the antithesis that "the deep speculations of the preceding chapter are made wholly superfluous" by the argument that "concepts of spirit-forms" are the products of "the sick mind", "the fevered brains of deluded enthusiasts". The argument rests on the supposition that "through some accident or sickness, certain organs of the brain are so distorted and their natural balance so disturbed that . . . the image that is the work of the mere imagination would be represented as an object that is presented to the outer senses". Despite this, Kant claims an open mind, although his "conclusion of the theory of spirits" holds that "there can be all sorts of *opinions* but never any *knowledge* about them".

He ends the first Part of *Dreams* saying: "And now I lay aside this whole matter of spirits, an extensive part of metaphysics, as settled and completed." But the second Part nevertheless launches into "certain nonsensical things" that "find acceptance even by rational men, merely because they are generally talked about. Among these belong spiritual healing, the dowsing rod, precognition . . . and the like." The philosophical justification for this dismissal seems to come in the closing chapter of the second Part. He wrote that "eventually science arrives at the determination of the limits set for it by the nature of human reason". Then "the boundaries draw closer together and marker stones are laid that never again allow investigation to wander beyond its proper district." These seem very counter-productive statements in a field of science like psychical research: in current practice, "human reason" may justifiably be translated as human misjudgement and prejudice that sets up the kind of policing much in evidence today, patrolling the limits to what is taken to constitute "good" science, and attacking anyone caught straying beyond science's "proper district". Kant seemed to overestimate the capacity of human reason to be wholly reasonable and proof against prejudice, politics and ignorance.

A few lines down, Kant holds that causal relations eventually "must only be derived from experience", yet experience is placed in subjugation to a line of reason that requires bringing observations under "rule". Since the "rule" can be grounded in ignorance or prejudice, he does not safeguard himself against unreasonably dismissing paranormal phenomena as "nonsensical things", despite his development of a "critical" philosophy. This limitation continued into his mature work; as Whiteman (1967) has pointed out, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) holds precognition and telepathy to be concepts that are "altogether groundless, as they cannot be based on experience and its known laws". This is repeated parrot-like in current Establishment circles despite the vast range of now well-attested experience, and the dismantling by physics of "known laws" as conceived in the eighteenth century. The proscriptions of what poses as "human reason" continue to be a burden to ground-breaking areas of science such as psychical research.

Kant did not claim to have determined the limits of reason precisely, yet he warned his reader about the fruitlessness of any question "that requires data from a different world than the one he senses". This places Swedenborg and "conversing with spirit forms" out of the court of "reason", and Kant ended his third chapter advising the reader to "stay with what is useful". This advice still echoes in the present dominant mindset. Given this situation, it may seem extraordinary that psychical research has been able to gain any foothold at all over the last 120 years, conducted under a dominating intellectual dismissiveness exemplified by Kant.

The limits of human understanding or of human reason were to Kant a matter for major philosophical investigation, an approach whose importance need not be questioned; what is to be questioned is his placing of intellectual limits on human *experience*. Practices for inducing states that may lead to a broadening of experience and perception, which currently receive much attention, did not enter his thinking. Despite this, his later philosophy may be seen to allow room for development. The nature of our perceptual faculties, he

argued, determine how the world presents itself to us. Put drastically, what our state is, that is what we perceive. An alteration of one's state will lead to an alteration of one's mode of perception and kind of experience. Attempts to bring about altered states of consciousness to open the gates of perception, as for example in meditation and ganzfeld sessions, therefore need not be seen to be wholly in conflict with Kant's philosophy.

In the introduction to his book, Johnson puts forward the view that *Dreams* served Kant a double purpose, in both communicating "a positive metaphysical teaching based upon serious researches into Swedenborg" while at the same time dispelling "rumors that Kant took Swedenborg seriously by heaping ridicule on him". The disparity between his publicly stated "official philosophy" and his privately guarded "personal philosophy" is a measure of his "conflicted" state. Many minds are still conflicted over the findings—or even the prospect—of psychical research; the politics of denial, duplicity and deviousness are rampant. "Human reason" readily succumbs to human prejudice, politics and ignorance, and the shadow cast by this falsity needs continual exposure, whether or not it comes from a towering figure like Immanuel Kant.

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