EVIDENCE FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

Stephen Bostock

I remember at school someone once raising the problem of what would happen when an irresistible force meets an immoveable object. It's a bit like that with my present subject. For any possibility of an afterlife for human beings has long seemed to me out of the question because of the obvious complete dependence of our minds and consciousness on the brain, and because our minds, like our brains, must be a product of evolution. So how could a mind or its consciousness possibly exist independently? But I've recently learnt of apparently undeniable evidence for the possible existence of disembodied minds or spirits. I'll give some account of one particular case – a staggering one, as far as I'm concerned. But suppose – just suppose – such do exist. All sorts of new problems then rear up. I'll give some examples of these too. So in the end I'm left baffled.

So first, consciousness and how it must depend on the brain. It's true that we can't yet explain how consciousness comes about. There is still an explanatory gap, as it's been called, between the neurophysiological events that go on in our brain and our actual conscious experiences. But that gap is narrowing, At least we now know a vast amount about various occurrences in the brain which must have a lot to do with producing the experiences that we all have, especially visual experiences, an important part of our consciousness. We know that contributions to our visual experiences occur in no less than thirty separate parts of the brain. And if we still don't know how the formation of new synapses – the links between our neurons – can produce our visual experiences, we do know what can happen as a result, sometimes, of small strokes occurring in specific parts of the brain. They can knock out just one

doi:10.1017/S1477175610000175 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2010
Think 26, Vol. 9 (Autumn 2010)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bit of seeing, like the colour part, or the movement part. If all these parts were knocked out by brain damage, we would cease to see – how could it be otherwise?

There's probably a lot less known, still, about exactly where thinking occurs in the brain, or where the actual seat of consciousness is, or whether indeed consciousness *can* be located in any one particular area. But all the indications seem to be that thinking and consciousness must be as dependent on the workings of *some* part of our brain, and probably as vulnerable if we are unlucky to the effects of strokes, as is our ability to see.

And then the fact that our brains *are* so extraordinarily complex, and the fact that they have evolved – why would these both be the case if consciousness could just exist on its own, as it were? I accept that we are in no position to state that there just could not be a disembodied mind. We can't prove, for example, that God doesn't exist, however unlikely that may seem to us. But at least we can be virtually certain – or so I would have thought – that our *own* minds, and those of other animals such as our fellow mammals, can't go on existing after the death of our and their physical bodies, without which, including nervous systems and all the rest of it, minds as we know them obviously can't function.

And now for some of the evidence that this isn't necessarily the end of the story. We have all heard of strange poltergeist cases, peculiar goings on, often in family homes with problems, such as disturbed children or teenagers, and which sometimes find their way into local or more rarely national newspapers. One particular poltergeist case, known as the Cardiff Poltergeist, seems to me of particular interest because it is very unusual in ways which seem to make the usual explanations of poltergeist phenomena, for what they are worth, inapplicable. The strange incidents occurred not in a private home but in, of all places, a lawnmower repair workshop, with garden shop attached, where there were no children or teenagers around, and no-one who was in any way disturbed or distressed in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press

way that is sadly often the case in run of the mill poltergeist cases (not that any of them are really other than absolutely weird). Those who were involved were the sort of down to earth, sensible, no nonsense people you would expect to find running and working a lawnmower repair workshop. There was nobody in whose interests it could possibly have been to fake mysterious, spooky events. Not that some of them *could* have been faked.

The events started with apparent stone throwing on the roof by boys. The police were called, no boys were to be seen, but the noise of stone throwing continued. Later, small stones started to be thrown *inside* the workshop from one corner (only one), though no-one was ever hurt. The owner initiated what became an occasional game – he picked up one of the stones, threw it back, and found another was thrown from the corner in reply. At least once, the owner threw a stone, received one back, then made as if to throw another but didn't (like the way some people tease their dogs). His pretend throw brought a stone back, but then when he did the pretend throw a second time, no stone came back – for all the world as if the supposed poltergeist was learning as a dog would, or of course a human.

Three or four people, including the owner's wife and a couple or so of mechanics, one a former plumber, experienced the mysterious stone throwing. They became quite fond of whatever was causing the odd events and called it or him 'Pete'. Pete did even odder things, downright extraordinary, apparently impossible, things, like dropping money (mostly 1912 pennies) from the ceiling, and once pinning a five pound note to the ceiling (which to all intents and purposes was impossible to reach), and transporting, apparently instantly, staples and paper to the workshop from the office. Some of these actions occurred as responses to joking requests from the owner or his staff.

The events were investigated by David Fontana, a Professor of Psychology with interests in the study of the paranormal. He was called in by the Society for Psychical Research, which the owner had contacted on the advice of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a local clergyman. Fontana witnessed some of the events himself, and on one occasion threw a stone himself at the corner, when alone in the workshop by arrangement with the owner, and got a stone back from Pete.

How *can* the whole business be explained? Lying by everyone concerned? Logically possible, but close to nonsensical as a serious claim, especially, for myself, in the case of Fontana, a reputable and successful academic, whom I've met and heard lecture, but also close to nonsensical as a charge against the owner and his wife, who had no motivation for deceit, and who are obviously genuine, honest people. Interviews with them are available on Google. A mass hallucination? This seems ruled out by the interplay between Pete and the people in the workshop. How can a hallucination include throwing a stone and getting one back? I suppose a sort of virtual reality on 'Matrix' lines could be invoked, but then this could be an explanation of anything that ever happens to us – for those whose technological fantasies have wholly run away with them.

Some other odd things happened. A clear account of the whole business can be found in a book by David Fontana (*Is There an Afterlife?*, 2005, pp. 64–80). The quickest source of further information would be the web.

Some will say that the whole business is just obviously nonsense, such things can't happen. I'm not saying that there can't be some natural explanation, such as magnetic or electrical activity, though I don't see how this could explain the 'interplay' with Pete. But for me the Cardiff case is backed up by all those other poltergeist cases, some of them recent and very peculiar, and whose details can easily be found, such as the Enfield Poltergeist Case, and others long ago – in fact stretching back into history. No doubt there will be fraud in some, perhaps in many, but it seems incredible that there should be no true accounts of genuinely unexplained events in any of them.

So what I am saying is that there is clearly evidence for the possibility of disembodied minds or spirits. I am not saying there is proof of their actual existence, but then it is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press

arguable that hardly anything even in science is actually *proved* – though personally I think it *is* proved to all intents and purposes that the earth goes round the sun and that evolution occurs. But that's by the way. Let's accept that we are confronted by *evidence*, though not proof, that disembodied spirits or minds can exist. What problems then follow?

The first problem, it seems to me, with being a disembodied spirit is how you would move. What would moving *mean* if you've no body? Do you just think yourself around? For that matter, what would it mean to *be* anywhere, to be in one place rather than another, if you've no body? I suppose even more fundamental is the question how you could think or be conscious without a brain or, related to this, how you could see without eyes, or hear without ears, as well as without a brain and nervous system. If you can see and hear without needing sense organs or a brain, how would you cut out what you don't *want* to see or hear? How would you avoid being blinded and deafened by 'noise'?

Then there's something very strange which is often reported in poltergeist cases, and if it wasn't, there'd be, I suppose, nothing to report. How could disembodied minds or spirits have effects on material objects? How could they do things? And, indeed, *throw* things, like Pete? It's perhaps worth mentioning that Pete's throwing apparently wasn't real or ordinary throwing, because the stones were never seen in flight. It was as if they just fell at their destination. Perhaps it's done by thought (but how do you think without a brain?). There are many reports of the temperature falling when strange events occur. It's been suggested that energy is being withdrawn from the air. One striking example of such an event was in another poltergeist case, known as the Paisley Pottery case. On one occasion the pottery instructor, a sensible, straightforward and obviously brave man (an interview with him is available on the web) opened the door of the glazing room (where he'd been shortly before with many students and it had got very warm), following heavy knocking from inside, and found the temperature in the room had become icy. But how *could*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press

energy be extracted? By thought? And how could it be put to use? Poltergeists seem able to carry out difficult tasks very precisely. An example is another incident in this same Paisley Pottery case, where some heavy vases were put on a table without the contents being spilled, which the mere humans who put them back on the floor afterwards (it had happened during the night) couldn't avoid doing.

Another problem is the fact that people die at all sorts of different stages in their lives. Do they just stay at those stages in the afterlife? Do babies stay as babies (as supposed in the now cancelled Roman Catholic doctrine of Limbo)? Do children who die stay as children? How could they grow up without bodies? Come to that, what would be the difference between an adult and a child in a bodiless state? They just *think* differently, perhaps? If old when we die, do we stay old? Or can we choose our age perhaps? But why couldn't the children or the babies choose to be older then? Difficult for babies to do this! Still more difficult, one would think, for embryos! I suppose it would depend on their age, and how far their brains had developed, whether they would have an afterlife at all. Or would that be irrelevant? Do we all have souls from the start, as in Roman Catholic doctrine?

Then there's another big problem, though not perhaps for Roman Catholics, including Descartes, who supposedly thought animals didn't have souls, but were just animate automata. What about animals? Surely if there is a possibility that humans have afterlives, isn't this just as likely to be true of our close cousins the chimps, and the other apes, and monkeys, and mammals, indeed the lot? I note a review of a recent book, Gordon Smith, *The Amazing Power of Animals* (2008), which apparently produces evidence (what on earth could this be?) that familiar animals like dogs and horses have an afterlife. It seems to me reasonable to suppose this is likely, *if* humans have an afterlife. But what about the dinosaurs, not to mention all the millions of other extinct species, never mind actual *individuals*! It's going to be awfully crowded, as Descartes

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reasonably suggested when ruling out the likelihood of flies and wasps having an afterlife. Is it going to be safe? Well I suppose neither a T. rex nor a tiger could eat you (or would want to) if both they – and you – were disembodied.

Of course, even apart from the problem of other animals, it's going to be awfully crowded in the hereafter just with all the people, with our population now hitting the six billion mark. But then, if there are no *bodies*, I suppose it won't be crowded at all. Space is a physical concept. Mind you, these poltergeists seem pretty localised – it's very much as if they really can move about – whatever that means of a disembodied mind. I suppose it means having effects on certain physical objects, for a start.

One problem would be that it might not be possible to find anyone else, including loved ones, in an afterlife. This is a point made by the distinguished Cambridge philosopher C. D. Broad in the Preface to his 1960 *Lectures on Psychical Research*. He remarks that those who have hopes of an afterlife naturally look forward especially to reunions with loved ones, but suggests there would be no guarantee of this. In view of some of the considerations above, this seems to me very reasonable. He also makes the point that in view of how unpleasant life here is for many humans, it seems unduly optimistic to assume that life in the hereafter, if there is one, is going to be better. This is one reason, he tells us, why he is not personally hoping for an afterlife. He also remarks that for himself, it would have the downside of presumably meaning there was no escape. You could never get away from being yourself. However none of us are, presumably, going to get any choice in the matter. It won't be a matter of us deciding.

Of course, there have been religious believers, and even still are, who threaten us with untold horrors in hell if we do not behave ourselves in accordance with some religious doctrine. This is to me all nonsense, as it is also today to most sophisticated Christian believers, because it is close to incoherent. I am thinking of the craziness of believing in an all-loving God who at the same time is far, far worse

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press

than Hitler. For even Hitler didn't commit people to concentration camps *for ever*.

Another problem, or perhaps just a puzzle, is that, while there is evidence that certain disembodied minds get in touch with us or make a nuisance of themselves, most don't. There is some suggestion that Pete may have been the ghost of a young boy killed in a car accident near the workshop some years before. Do most spirits move on elsewhere while some get stuck 'here'? This is a traditional explanation of hauntings. It's rather a depressing prospect – at least for those who haven't managed to move on. Let's hope it's not so depressing for those who have made the transition to somewhere else. Or perhaps there's an afterlife for some and not for others. But why should that be? More likely, I think, that it's part of our natural history, as it were – that if some survive, all do. Just as we all have brains and minds while we're here.

Despite the almost ludicrous problems of the afterlife, I was serious above in my attempt to outline how the apparent facts relating to Pete, plus many, many other reported poltergeist cases, and plus other occurrences such as near death experiences and out of body experiences, do provide *evidence* for the possibility of disembodied minds or spirits. I don't think there is any justification for just denying the evidence because we can't explain it. Perhaps the most reasonable position is to accept the evidence as needing explaining but put on hold any actual explanation of it because we just can't provide any. Perhaps such explanation will be forthcoming in the future. As for the afterlife, it still seems to me improbable, in view of such considerations as I have given. But in the light of Pete, it's not impossible.

Dr Stephen Bostock is an Honorary Research Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. s.bostock@philosophy.arts.gla.ac.uk

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000175 Published online by Cambridge University Press