nature

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Should we leave it to the mystics?

THE French postal strike delayed until recently the arrival of the latest of one of UNESCO's more interesting periodicals, *Impact of Science on Society*. There are several journals attempting to fill the role of spanning the gaps between science, policymakers, educationalists and the public, and all of them, one suspects, suffer from the same problem: the scientist feels he should read them, but never quite finds time.

Impact (its long title sounds a little dull, its short one suggests it should be on the bookstalls along with *Probe, Thrust, Health* and . . . *Nature*) is always worth devoting time to, and this most recent issue, on the parasciences, is no exception. A dozen writers provide essays on subjects ranging from the design for a spaceship reported in the Book of the prophet Ezekiel to vision through the fingers. The whole is elegantly introduced through an essay (adapted from the *The Roots of Coincidence*) by Arthur Koestler.

One of the persistent complaints of those who work in fields outside orthodox science is that they cannot get scientists to take them seriously—although one must note that of 48 past presidents of the Society for Psychical Research, nine were Fellows of the Royal Society. And yet there are some, both scientists and parascientists, who believe that the two fields represent opposite sides of the coin and scientists should not be brought in to attempt to explain what is inexplicable in their terms (in much the same way that science and religion seem, on the whole, to have kept each other at a respectful arms-length). It is thus a matter of some interest to see what parascience says when given a highly respectable platform from which to speak to the establishment.

The result is somewhat disappointing. Part of this, no doubt, stems from the necessary variability produced in bringing together authors from many nations. But part of the disappointment is that, with the exception of Koestler, none of the proponents of the parasciences really gets down to the serious business of trying to persuade the reader that there is something in it.

Koestler is an exception because he can see the strange side of the modern physicist's perception of nature and he can play on it to create a certain malaise in the reader's mind. Time reversals, anti-matter, a hundred or more elementary particles scientists can accept these, but still choke on the thought of extrasensory perception, let alone psychokinesis. It's a good though certainly not a clinching argument, but much of what follows in the journal demonstrates why it is that scientists are still sceptical. Practitioners either indulge in the production of wide-ranging samplers of superficial and inadequately reported observations, or plunge into extended deep speculation without so much as a glance at the reader to see if he needs any convincing even to take the first step.

Yet for all this there are some good things, particularly where science and technology are allowed to do the explaining. Kirlian photography, the observation of corona discharges, is well dealt with by Rudolph Guzik, who makes it clear that a very complex (and in a sense unpredictable) phenomenon can be understood within the confines of 'normal science' provided that mystics, using words like 'life force' and 'psionic aura' do not enshroud the whole field in nonsenses and drive away those who could put it on a rational footing. One suspects that this is a paradigm for much of what exists in and beyond the fringe of science. There are many things which in the past were deemed not 'normal', that is not common-place experience. Among these could be included eclipses, earthquakes and mirages, and all of these have yielded to rational study. Nor is science reckoned to have failed because some of these phenomena are irregular and unpredictable as yet. Other 'not-normal' phenomena, being less easy to master scientifically and more susceptible to the attentions of quacks and tricksters, have now receded into a world of the half-light, and the scientist wishing to investigate has first to discern whether he is being taken for a ride by the practitioner. He may rather be taken for a ride by his own senses, and this indisputably is a subject worthy of research: a scientist may be able to satisfy himself that the practitioner is not consciously deceiving but be unqualified to spot his own perceptual errors. For a start he should be suspicious of any phenomena which require darkened rooms or his ability to absorb a wide variety of happenings and pronounce on the normality or otherwise of one of these—not necessarily the one he was concentrating on.

There may well remain, however, things worthy of our attention—a sort of dry residue. The parasciences may not yet have unearthed much for which there is a cast-iron case for scientific explanation, but there is ample material crying out for verification, and the lessons learnt over the last few years should have improved techniques and procedures for getting to the heart of the deception/reality question. Now, surely, is the time for scientists in large numbers to take a more practical interest in these obstinate issues. If we fail to do so, parascience will recede further into the mystic's world and will take with it much of the public's sympathy.

Investigation in the para-world is neither easy nor always agreeable. Public interest, however, demands, rightly or wrongly, that scientists come to grips with the propositions being made. And if scientists won't come in with rational attitudes and, where necessary, rational explanations, they can hardly be surprised if the forces of irrationalism take over. □