

Editorial: On Scientific Amnesia

Etzel Cardeña

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.
George Santayana (1905)

In coincidence -or synchrony, if you will- with Chris Roe's focus in his Parapsychological Association (PA) Presidential Address (this issue) on the extraordinary contributions of Charles (Chuck) Honorton, I am reprinting in the PA's bulletin *Mindfield* one of his great papers on the relation between alterations of consciousness and experimental psi (Honorton, 1976). Chuck's justified demolition of dishonest criticism notwithstanding, any discipline or system requires self-criticism to avoid dogmatisms and potential catastrophes, and parapsychology is not an exception (Cardeña, 2011). This completely unoriginal reflection came to my mind while I was attending the latest PA convention in Athens. As is the case with just about every other convention I have attended, and I have gone to meetings of at least three major disciplines and various subdisciplines, the quality of the papers followed a more-or-less normal distribution, with a few very good ones, the majority showing competence, and some that were quite bad. I have been around enough to have heard or read many times the cliché that a whole conference program was "outstanding", when that is rarely, if ever, the case.

In the Athens convention what was particularly problematic to me was the ignorance or disregard by some presenters of earlier and very pertinent research and literature, as if somehow the topic had not been studied until the authors decided to focus their attention on it. Partly, I believe, this evidences an inadequate literature review and a failure to do one's homework, but also arrogance in the assumption that what was done previously is not worth reading, as if somehow we are now more knowledgeable and/or brighter than people in the past (reading any paper by Chuck Honorton or some of the other great figures in the field should quickly disabuse any reader of that false belief). As one of my editorship policies, I demand that papers contain adequate literature reviews of relevant works, no matter how old. Of course, the goal of a complete literature review can only be aspirational, as I always find to my dismay after publishing a paper after conducting a literature search that I had missed one or more papers that gave me precious information and insight.

I can contrast sloppy, willful "amnesia" with an extraordinary presentation I heard on the very sophisticated and flexible cognition of bees (Perry, Barron, & Chittka, 2017). Besides the ingenuity of the researchers, it was obvious that they had engaged in a decades-long programmatic set of studies, which clearly built on previous work and responded to it. It is unmistakable that those authors have greatly advanced our understanding of the topic. In contrast, besides the work of the Rhines and collaborators, Chuck Honorton, and a few others, there are few examples in parapsychology of a similar steadfast pursuit. Although I do not agree with Richard Wiseman's interpretation (2009) that the frequent "jumping ship" by psi researchers to other topics or research paradigms is based on the inexistence of psi, I agree with his remark that parapsychologists (and their graduate students) do not maintain often enough their focus on further developing a question or issue as much as they should, and as much as successful scientists even in other originally marginal areas such as hypnosis have done (Cardeña, 2010). When the preeminent philosopher

Jorge (anglicized as “George”) Santayana wrote the oft-quoted sentence above about the need to remember the past he was not referring to parapsychology, but he might have.

References

- Cardeña, E. (2010). Presidential address: A look at the potential future of parapsychology with help from a regression to the hypnotic past. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 74, 15-30.
- Cardeña, E. (2011). On wolverines and epistemological totalitarianism. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 75, 3-14.
- Honorton, C. (1976) Has science developed the competence to confront the claims of the paranormal? Presidential Address, Parapsychological Association. In J. D. Morris, W. G. Roll, & R.L. Morris (Eds.), *Research in Parapsychology, 1975* (pp. 199-223). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.
- Perry C. J., Barron A. B. & Chittka L. (2017) The frontiers of insect cognition. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Science*, 16, 111-118.
- Santayana, G. (1905). *Reason in common sense*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Son. Retrievable from http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000-h/vol1.html#CHAPTER_I_THE_BIRTH_OF_REASON
- Wiseman, R. (2009). Heads I win, tails you lose. *Skeptical Inquirer*. 34(1), 36–40.