CJ Ducasse

CJ Ducasse was an American philosopher who in 1961 published a major study of psi phenomena, endorsing their existence and arguing that they constitute evidence for postmortem survival. This article describes and critiques his ideas.

Curt John Ducasse (1881-1969) was a distinguished American philosopher who taught at the University of Washington and Brown University and spent most of his professional career at the latter. He is best known for his work in metaphysics and epistemology (especially for his discussions about causality and the nature of mind) as well as aesthetics,[1] and he greatly influenced the work of many mid- and late-twentieth-century analytic philosophers. His magnum opus in parapsychology is his book, *A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life After Death* (1961).[2]

Ducasse was interested in parapsychology even very early in his career. In *A Critical Examination* he noted that, more than fifty years earlier, he had witnessed the ostensible gradual materialization of a man's body 'in red light, but not under test conditions.'[3] However, he didn't seriously tackle the issues of parapsychology until the 1940s. Thereafter, he expressed his objectives in terms of epistemic attitudes—in particular, what one was justified in believing (or was obligated to believe), and what one merely had a right to believe.

Although Ducasse's views on the strength of the evidence evolved over the years, he was consistently clear that, as far as the *experimental* evidence for ESP and PK was concerned, that evidence is 'practically conclusive',[4] because

> … certain experimental methods, and statistical procedures for the treatment of the results obtained by those methods, have been devised and employed; and in this way demonstration of the reality of these paranormal perceptions has to some extent been made repeatable.[5]

So Ducasse thought he had 'a justified belief in these phenomena, not just a right to believe, and that to believe otherwise would be irrational.'[6]

By contrast, Ducasse's position on the evidence for survival evolved somewhat and was more cautious. When he wrote his books *Nature, Mind, and Death* and *A Philosophical Scrutiny of Religion*,[7] he contended that we have only a right, but not an obligation, to believe in survival and reincarnation. A decade later, however, Ducasse was more confident, although still not as confident as he was with respect to experimentally demonstrated psi phenomena. He wrote:

> … the balance of the evidence so far obtained is on the side of the reality of survival and, in the best cases, of survival not merely of memories of the life on earth, but of survival also of the most significant capacities of the human mind, and of continuing exercise of those.[8]

The Meaning of 'Paranormal'

It was Ducasse who coined the term ‘paranormal’, in order to divest *psychical* research of its psychological associations. He felt that this field of research concerned *paranormal* phenomena – that is, a distinct domain not to be subsumed under a standard or widely-recognized set of psychological phenomena. And he tried (as have some others) to specify what, exactly, that domain is.

Ducasse’s account of paranormality, in more or less disguised (and usually simplified) forms, is perhaps the one most often advanced by parapsychologists and laymen alike.9 This account is seriously flawed, but its mistakes are instructive.

Ducasse’s proposal runs as follows.

(D1) Phenomenon *P* is paranormal: (a) the cause of *P* is not that from which phenomena of that sort ordinarily result, and (b) the cause of *P* is nothing yet known to the natural sciences as capable of causing a phenomenon of that sort.

One apparent virtue of (D1), which Ducasse acknowledged, is that it permits the domain of the paranormal to change with time, as the scope of science inevitably widens. Thus, phenomena regarded at one time as paranormal might come to be regarded later as either abnormal or normal. Probably, we can agree with Ducasse that this seems to be a virtue of (D1). Such a shift in perspective appears to have occurred with respect to solar eclipses, hypnosis, and various electromagnetic phenomena, and quite possibly it will happen again with respect to some phenomena now regarded as ostensibly paranormal.

Incidentally, it is not clear what Ducasse regarded as an *abnormal* phenomenon when he proposed (D1). If he had a definite view at all, it was probably something like this. Unlike paranormal phenomena, normal and abnormal phenomena are both explicable by current science, and the difference between normal and abnormal phenomena has to do with the difference in their frequency of occurrence. But as we noted in the previous section, one needs to say more than this in order to do justice to the pre-theoretic distinction between the merely infrequent and the abnormal.

In any case, (D1) will not work. Consider clause (a). It is reasonably clear why Ducasse included that clause, and for that matter why he emphasized the *cause* of the phenomenon in question. The reason is that *manifestations* of paranormal phenomena might be indistinguishable from those of ordinary phenomena. For example, sometimes pictures just fall off walls, for a variety of humdrum reasons. At other times a magician might make the picture fall, and although the causes may not be humdrum, they are nevertheless ordinary mechanical causes not even remotely likely to disrupt the body of our scientific theories. But a picture made to fall by means of PK may be observationally indistinguishable from the ordinary event or from the handiwork of a magician. What would make the PK case paranormal would have to do with the cause, and not the manifestation, of the event in question.

But despite the reasonableness of Ducasse’s emphasis on causes, clause (a) is problematical. The problem is that it requires at least two causes for the type of phenomenon to which *P* belongs: (i) that from which such phenomena ordinarily

result, and (ii) that from which such phenomena paranormally result. But of course some sorts of phenomena, even if they can be produced in more than one way, may be sufficiently unprecedented that there is no cause at all from which they *ordinarily* result. That would presumably be true in the case of such relatively uncommon phenomena as ostensible possession and poltergeist manifestations (what is the *ordinary* cause of objects flying across a room *without visible signs of agency*?). Moreover, some sorts of ostensibly paranormal phenomena (e.g., apparent telepathic and clairvoyant interaction) may not have more than one cause, and their sole cause may be what inclines us to regard them as paranormal in the first place. Probably the best way to avoid these difficulties would be to ignore clause (a) altogether and treat clause (b) of (D1) as expressing the substance of Ducasse's account. Let us, then, consider the following.

(D2) Phenomenon *P* is paranormal: the cause of *P* is nothing yet known to the natural sciences as capable of causing a phenomenon of that sort.

But even this trimmed definition is not satisfactory, because the phrase 'yet known to the natural sciences' is crucially ambiguous. Suppose that some phenomenon *P* is (at least in principle) causally explicable in terms of current scientific theory, but suppose also that no one has discovered what that explanation is. Obviously, the explanatory limitation here is ours and not that of our current theories. So this state of affairs would not justify our taking *P* to be paranormal. However, the situation satisfies (D2), at least when we understand the phrase in question to mean something like 'yet discovered by anyone in the natural sciences.' So at the very best, the case described is one in which we are entitled to regard *P* as *ostensibly* paranormal. Now presumably we want our definition of 'paranormal' to respect our classification of phenomena as ostensibly paranormal. Likewise, we presumably don't want the definition to obliterate the distinction between the ostensibly and the genuinely paranormal. So let us recast (D2) to exclude cases in which paranormality is linked to our failure to appreciate the explanatory fecundity of our best theories. In fact, what Ducasse probably had in mind is something like:

(D3) Phenomenon *P* is paranormal: *P* is in fact causally inexplicable in terms of current scientific theory.

Although (D3) avoids the difficulty just discussed, it too is seriously flawed. The history of science may be regarded as a saga in which observed anomalies periodically force the scientific community to alter or abandon prevailing theories. But even when we consider the anomalous occurrences that occasioned the most profound changes in scientific theory, we find that they were not regarded at the time as ostensibly paranormal. For example, during the twilight of Newtonian physics, scientists grappled with numerous phenomena which received theory simply could not handle (for example, the anomalous advance of Mercury's perihelion, the so-called 'ultraviolet catastrophe,' and the negative results of the Michelson-Morley experiment). Nevertheless, they were not for that reason regarded as sufficiently bizarre (or whatever is required) to be taken as ostensibly paranormal. Thus, the important error involved in linking paranormality merely to scientific inexplicability is that it leads to the highly counter-intuitive result that all scientific anomalies are paranormal.

On the Importance of Spontaneous Cases

Although he wrote at a time when many were becoming fascinated and impressed by Rhine's quantitative experimental studies, and although he had considerable respect for that work himself, Ducasse remained firm in his defense of evidence gathered outside the lab.

For example, Ducasse rejected the view of Rhine and others that controlled experiments are necessary to establish the reality of psi phenomena, and that reports of phenomena outside the lab can do no more than to suggest what the relevant experiments might be. Ducasse noted, 'earthquakes, hurricanes, eclipses of the sun and moon, or the fall of aerolites, are phenomena over the conditions of which we have not the slightest control; and yet … their occurrence is completely established'.[10]

Furthermore, many critics of spontaneous cases charge that witnesses of ostensibly paranormal phenomena are disposed to see the miraculous or to see what they want, and thus they are prone to misperceive, deceive themselves, and perhaps even lie or exaggerate (possibly unconsciously) to protect their preconceptions. Therefore, the critics often conclude, it is more reasonable to suppose that some process of motivated misperception, self-deception, or dishonesty is at work than to treat such eyewitness testimony as serious evidence for the paranormal.

In response, Ducasse pointed out that in many cases it's quite clear—once the evidence is examined carefully and thoroughly—that observer reports can't be dismissed as biased. For example, in some cases it's clear that investigators were open-minded and had no metaphysical axe to grind. In fact, in some of the best cases—such as the 1908 Naples sittings with Palladino—the experimenters were clearly biased from the start *against* Eusapia and the reality of PK, and only grudgingly concluded that her phenomena were genuine.

Ducasse was also quick to note that the appeal to human bias is double-edged, cutting against reports by the credulous *and* the incredulous. If our biases may lead us to make perceptual errors, misremember, or lie, then we should be as suspicious of testimony from nonbelievers as from believers. If (based on their favorable dispositions) we distrust reports by the apparently credulous or sympathetic that certain odd phenomena occurred, we should (by parity of reasoning) be equally wary of reports by the incredulous or unsympathetic that the alleged phenomena did not occur (or that cheating occurred instead). Ducasse wrote,

> … allegations of detection of fraud, or of malobservation, or of misinterpretation of what was observed, or of hypnotically induced hallucinations, have to be scrutinized *as closely and as critically* as must the testimony *for* the reality of the phenomena. For there is likely to be just as much wishful thinking, prejudice, emotion, snap judgment, naiveté, and intellectual dishonesty on the side of orthodoxy, of skepticism, and of conservatism, as on the side of hunger for and of belief in the marvelous. The emotional motivation for irresponsible disbelief is, in fact, probably even stronger—especially in scientifically educated persons whose pride of

> knowledge is at stake—than is in other persons the motivation for irresponsible belief.[11]

That is why Ducasse cautions that 'the truly scientific attitude is neither the will to believe nor the will to disbelieve, but the will to investigate'.[12] Similarly, he argues for the need to 'preserve the plasticity of opinion that permits altering previous conclusions readily if new items of evidence demanding it present themselves'.[13] And somewhat cynically (but realistically), he observes,

> … psychologists and other men of science often…get as emotional, and quite as illogical and intellectually irresponsible, as do ordinary persons. The fact is that, like the latter, the majority of scientists think rationally only when there is for them no strong emotional temptation to do otherwise.'[14]

Ducasse's caveat about irresponsible disbelief is not simply plausible in the abstract. In fact, the history of parapsychology chronicles an impressive record of blindness, intellectual cowardice, and mendacity on the part of skeptics and ardent nonbelievers, some of them prominent scientists.[15]

Not surprisingly, Ducasse was well-acquainted with the usual skeptical strategies for dismissing the evidence for psi generally (not just spontaneous cases), and he rebutted them in many of his publications. For example, he attacked the familiar allegation that paranormal phenomena—for example, human levitation—are impossible and violate laws of Nature. He noted,

> … obviously, what is possible or impossible in Nature is always so relatively to some particular set of circumstances and of means or forces available. It is impossible, for instance, to make one's voice heard all the way across the Atlantic if one uses only air as means of transmission. But it is on the contrary possible and easy if one uses a telephone wire, or radio waves. Two hundred years ago, the then impossibility of transatlantic conversation would widely have been termed absolute; yet the only statement that would have been warranted is that it was impossible *by any means known at the time*.[16]

Along similar lines, Ducasse noted elsewhere that

> … when a scientist declares something to be impossible, *period*; that is, impossible not [merely] *by certain means under certain conditions*, but impossible *unconditionally*; then it is a mystery indeed how he can possibly know this. And, in fact, he does not know it but, when he asserts it, he is only dogmatizing even if unawares. The history of science is strewn with the corpses of absolute impossibilities rashly proclaimed at various times.[17]

Ducasse also had a response to those who dismiss psi phenomena on the grounds that they are antecedently improbable.

> … assertions of antecedent improbability always rest on the tacit but often in fact false assumption that the operative factors are the same in a presented case as they were in superficially similar past cases. For example, the antecedent improbability of the things an expert conjurer does on stage is extremely high if one takes as antecedent evidence what merely an ordinary

> person, under ordinary instead of staged conditions can do. The same is true of what geniuses, or so-called arithmetical prodigies, can do as compared with what ordinary men can do. And that a man is a genius or a calculating prodigy is shown by what he does do, not the reality of what he does by his being a genius or prodigy. This holds equally as regards a medium and his levitations or other paranormal phenomena.[18]

For example, it would be foolish to maintain that the unprecedented mnemonic abilities reported by Luria[19] are unlikely to be genuine, due to their antecedent improbability (based on the population of normal human beings). With reasoning such as that, we could forever avoid acknowledging the existence of exceptional human abilities. But then it is presumably equally indefensible to distrust nearly a quarter-century's worth of reports of decently-illuminated table levitations by DD Home, on the grounds that the antecedent improbability of that ability is overwhelmingly high.

Moreover, Ducasse recognized that some critics of psi research had a particular prejudice against testimony collected more than a century beforehand, such as that in favor of the levitations of St Joseph of Copertino.[20] He wrote,

> … the age of a piece of circumstantially stated, intelligent, and sincere testimony has no logical bearing on its force unless the testimony was biased by beliefs commonly held in the days of the witness but since proved to be groundless or false; or unless some normal explanation of the events judged by him to have been paranormal has since been discovered.[21]

Ducasse also offered some interesting comments on the proper way to study mediums—in particular, how to proceed so as not to intimidate or otherwise alienate them. In an unpublished paper presented at a 1955 conference on spontaneous cases organized by the SPR, Ducasse noted

> … it is methodologically imperative to learn to speak with them [the mediums] in their language, even if when so doing one would privately put between quotation marks some of the terms one was using; and imperative also to approach them in a manner that will not cause them to freeze up as soon as they see us coming, but will on the contrary enlist their good will.[22]

One could plausibly argue that it is precisely in this respect that the 1895 Cambridge investigations of Eusapia Palladino failed and the 1908 Naples sitting succeeded.[23]

And as far as the problem of fraud is concerned, Ducasse argued,

> … to generalize … from some or even many cases where fraud occurred, to *all* cases of reports of paranormal events, would be to yield uncritically to the promptings of an antecedent will to disbelieve. For only such a pre-existing negative faith could cause one thus to rule out of consideration *a priori* the possibility that, for example, darkness or dim light may be as objectively propitious to the occurrence of paranormal physical phenomena as it is necessary to the successful developing of photographic plates. Or again, only such a negative faith could make one disregard the possibility that a believing

> and trusting attitude, or at least an open-minded one, on the part of the persons at a séance towards the medium and the reality of his powers, may itself be a factor that contributes to the occurrence of genuine phenomena. For after all, the medium is human, and the exercise of certain kinds of capacity by a human being who possesses them does depend to some extent on the attitudes of others towards him at the time.[24]

Ducasse also noted that this general point applies equally to work in the lab.

> … in experimental work on extrasensory perception, the same subjects tend to make better scores with certain experimenters than with certain others whose attitude or manner somehow inhibits instead of stimulating their subjects.[25]

In addition to making occasional comments (such as those excerpted above) about the need for open-minded investigation into the paranormal, Ducasse also addressed the question: 'What accounts for the unscientific attitude with which… the majority of scientists continue to meet well-authenticated reports of [psi] phenomena?'[26] He continues with the following penetrating remarks:

The scientific attitude, as scientists and philosophers alike rightly proclaim, is characterized by unswerving and painstaking dedication to the discovery of truth; it is open-minded in the sense of free alike from adverse and from favorable prejudices; and it welcomes facts as such, no matter whether they confirm or invalidate the assumptions or theories on which they have bearing. In short, disinterested curiosity—the passion to know the truth—is the one scientific passion. It is a stern censor, which rules out of scientific judgments factors such as emotion, dogmatism, hopes or fears, and wishful belief or disbelief—factors which so generally vitiate the judgments of ordinary men.[27]

But, he notes,

> … like other men, scientists usually have the usual human frailties, even if they park some of them outside the doors of their laboratories. Inside the door, of course, they either live up to the demands of the scientific attitude, or they achieve nothing. But, outside, they are as prone as other men to pride of profession or of office; and the prestige with which the name, Scientist, endows them in the public eye easily provides for them an irresistible temptation to pontificate concerning all sorts of questions which fall outside their professional competence, but about which naive outsiders nevertheless respectfully ask them to speak because they are known as Scientists, and Scientists, by definition, are persons who know!
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> The oracular role which this flattering deference invites them to play, of course caters to the vanity of which they are no more free than other men, and which then almost fatally leads them to assume that—except when speaking to a fellow scientist on scientific matters—their utterances have high authority. For the idea which a person harbors of himself is largely determined by the picture of him which other persons hold out to him.
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> Now, that pleasing though mainly subconscious picture of himself as an oracle is what is outraged when outsiders venture to call to the attention of a scientist

certain facts, such as those psychical research investigates, which seem to clash with some of the principle of his science, but which he ignores. It is on such occasions that the admirable scientific attitude I have described easily deserts him. On such occasions,...the outraged scientist is prone to become unscientifically emotional, obscurantistic, inaccurate, illogical, evasive, dogmatic, and even personally abusive.[28]

On Precognition

Ducasse shared the concern voiced by his contemporary CD Broad about the notion of precognition—namely, that it was not clearly intelligible to say that a future event, something that does not yet exist at the time of a precognitive experience, could have any causal consequences at all. At the time of the precognition, one could reasonably say that the future event, at best, is simply an unrealized possibility. Thus, it's not clearly intelligible to say that tomorrow's plane crash could cause today's precognition of the crash. Clearly, this objection applies only to the retrocausal analysis of precognition—not the active analysis in terms of inferences from ESP of contemporary states of affairs, or else telepathic influence or PK.

Despite the problematic nature of this somewhat conventional (retrocausation-unfriendly) interpretation of the retrocausal view of precognition, Ducasse's approach to the topic was perhaps even more mysterious. He argued that the concepts of an event and events' temporal relations cannot be given in purely physical terms, although physical events are still intrinsically ordered by entropy. He dubbed this view 'theory Theta'.

> The fact from which theory Theta starts is that no definition of the adjectives 'past,' 'present,' or 'future,' *simpliciter*, i.e., applied categorically, can be given in purely physical terms; and hence that physical events *in themselves*, i.e., apart from the psychological events which are percepts of them, are not categorically either past, present, or future.
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> To physical events considered independently of percepts of them, the predicates 'past,' 'present,' or 'future' are therefore applicable not categorically but only conditionally. That is, one can say of a physical event *E* so considered, that it is future to (or temporally after or beyond) a certain other one *D from a certain third C*; but not simply that it is *future* ...
>
> This state of affairs entails that the serial time order of physical events in themselves has *no intrinsic direction*...[T]he relation 'temporally between', which determines the serial order of physical events, does not determine one rather than the other of two theoretically possible directions within that order. In terms of entropy, all that could be said would be that, in one of the two directions, entropy never decreases; whereas in the other direction it never increases, and this does not, *in itself*, i.e., independently of our perception of physical events, specify as 'real' one rather than the other direction in the series of physical events.[29]

So for Ducasse, there are two time series—the physical and the psychological. Moreover, 'in theory Theta, "now" has no purely physical meaning, and is predicable at all of a physical event only in the elliptical sense that that event is [the] object of a percept that is "now" in the literal sense',30 and that literal sense applies only to psychological events.

Ducasse's discussion of theory Theta is considerably more detailed than these brief remarks indicate. The reader should consult the source before deciding whether the theory is viable or even intelligible.

On Survival

The so-called 'problem of personal identity' can be viewed as either a metaphysical or an epistemological issue. Metaphysicians want to know *what it is* for one individual to be the same person as another, or the same person from one moment to the next. Epistemologists want to know *how to decide* if an individual is the same person as someone else, or from one moment to the next. Now a familiar issue in the philosophical literature on personal identity is whether—from a metaphysical point of view--persons can be identified and reidentified by psychological criteria alone, or whether the persistence of psychological states must be anchored in something physical—such as a persisting body. The relevance of that debate to the topic of postmortem survival is obvious, and Ducasse believed that a surviving self could be intelligibly understood to be nothing more than a persisting set of mental capacities. In one particularly important respect that position opposed Broad's view, and Ducasse had the opportunity to publish some of his objections to it.

As noted in the *Psi Encyclopedia* entry on CD Broad, he accepted the familiar view according to which survival entails the persistence of much or most of what is distinctive about a person's psychology or personality—for example, memories, interests, character traits. etc. But these features of the person would be retained postmortem in a dispositional (or conditional) form, in roughly the same way that memories can be said to exist—even in the absence of some present memory-episode—simply because those episodes *can* be elicited under the appropriate circumstances. And Broad argued that it's this dispositional aspect of one's mentality which forms the basis of the personality, and which cases of apparent survival suggest persists after death. To that extent, Broad and Ducasse were in agreement.

However, Broad insisted that dispositional properties must be grounded in some *categorical* (that is, non-dispositional) fact(s). For example, just as salt's dispositional property of solubility is explicable in terms of underlying categorical properties of salt's micro-structure, a person's dispositional personality or mental states (say, the trait of friendliness, or the memory of an earlier conversation) will be explicable in terms of underlying non-dispositional, or categorical, states. Often, the categorical states in question are assumed to be physical or bodily—for example, states of the brain.

However, Broad attempted to avoid this conventional physicalist gambit by saying that the categorical state(s) in question would be a kind of *sui generis* 'psychic factor' or 'Ψ-component'. And he proposed that this psychic factor can persist, not

as an ordinary physical object, but rather more like a broadcast of an orchestral performance that is not yet picked up by any suitably tuned receiver, and which exists still in the form of signals in the air. So Broad suggested that the dispositional basis of a person's 'personality (or at any rate some part of it) might continue to exist and to be organized in its former characteristic pattern, at least for a time after the death of his body, without being associated with any other physical organism.'[31]

By contrast, Ducasse proposed that a dispositional analysis *would* be sufficient, and that no appeal to underlying categorical states is required. He argued, first, that Broad's position was committed to an intolerable infinite regress:

> … it seems on the one hand impossible, and on the other unnecessary, 'that [quoting Broad] every conditional fact about a thing…be grounded on a categorical fact about its persistent minute structure or recurrent internal processes'. The impossibility arises from the fact that such 'persistent minute structure' or 'recurrent processes' as there may be will *themselves* automatically be but manifestations—i.e., instances of exercise—of dispositions *of those minute constituents*; so that if *all* dispositions really need some underlying categorical 'carrier', then the dispositions of those minute constituents too will need one; and so on, *ad infinitum*. Hence, ultimately categorical grounds, such as Broad suggests, are impossible.
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> On the other hand, that dispositions do not need categorical carriers of that kind becomes evident if one considers first the dispositions which together constitute the nature of a physical substance; for example, lead. The only 'carrier' of them needed for any kind of lead that actually exists is *some region of space during some time*; and that lead *actually exists* there then means simply that one or more of the dispositions which together define the nature of lead *are being exercised there then*; and that others of the would be exercised there if and when the environmental circumstances of that region of space changed in the relevant respects. Dispositions, simply as such, do not exist but only *subsist*, i.e., are conceivable. They *exist*, actually as distinguished from potentially, only where and when they are *being exercised*.
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> In order that an account of what would constitute existence of a *discarnate* personality be possible similarly in terms of exercise of one or more of the dispositions which define the particular nature of that personality, it is necessary that there should be a *psychical* analogue of the *physical place* at which, in the example of lead, some of its dispositions were being exercised.[32]

Before considering Ducasse's proposed psychical analogue to physical space, it should be noted that some would have dissented quickly to Ducasse's claim above 'that lead *actually exists* there then means simply that one or more of the dispositions which together define the nature of lead *are being exercised there then*.' They might ask 'exercised by what and *on what*?' How is this causal process to be understood in the absence of relevant categorical states of affairs, including the minute structures corresponding to those states of affairs? If some lead exists only dispositionally or potentially, in what sense can it be said that some lead exists to be acted upon? More specifically, how or in what sense can a mere potentiality act

upon—or be acted upon by—another mere potentiality? How, or in what sense, can it be correct to say that there's a chunk of lead in the next room waiting to be weighed and then melted? In fact, how can a mere potentiality have weight?

It seems quite unpromising to say, as Ducasse claims in the passage quoted above, that some lead subsists only in the sense of being conceivable. Many things are conceivable—for example, a 1348-sided polygon, but that doesn't seem to be sufficient grounds for saying that a 1348-sided polygon subsists and can be exercised to exist actually rather than potentially. Of course, a person or a computer could construct such an object, but that doesn't seem sufficient grounds for claiming that the polygon subsisted all along. Furthermore, time-travel seems to be conceivable, but it's not clearly even possible. Similarly for my ability to fly like Superman. So why do some conceivable things subsist and others not? One obvious answer seems ruled out by Ducasse—namely, that the conceivable things which subsist are those that are grounded already in some categorical states of affairs, with the rest existing only conceptually. Clearly, this aspect of Ducasse's position seems to need more work.

At any rate, in his book *Nature, Mind, and Death*, Ducasse explains what he has in mind when he speaks of a psychical analogue to physical space. First, he notes that 'physical "contact" and "distance" (spatial and temporal), and therefore, more generally, relative locations in physical space and time', can be defined 'in terms of physical causation direct or indirect.'[33] But then 'contact' and 'distance' in 'psychical space' can be similarly analyzed. Ducasse writes,

It seems possible to say that 'psychical contact' between mind *A* and another mind *B* would means that *A* and *B* are so related that occurrence of a certain event *E* in *A* would cause occurrence of a certain event *F* in *B directly*, i.e., without intermediary causation by *E* of some event *G* in any third mind *C*. Psychical contact as so defined seems to be what occurs in instances of telepathy between minds whose bodies are at physical distance from each other.

On the other hand, to say that a mind *A* is 'at a psychical distance' from a mind *B* would mean that they are so related that occurrence in *A* of a certain event *E* would cause occurrence of a certain event *F* in *B*, but would do so *only indirectly*, i.e., only though causation of some other event or events in one or more intermediary minds —the psychical distance between *A* and *B* being then said to be greater as the number of intermediaries is greater.[34]

Ducasse notes that this is an objective or *social* conception of psychical space and time—in terms of what a mind 'is and is not "in social position" to do to, and to be done to by, each of the other existing minds.'[35]

Finally, in a criticism of a paper by another philosopher, FC Donmeyer,[36] Ducasse took a stand on the survival vs living-agent-psi debate, arguing in favor of the former. In particular, he wanted to rebut the suggestion that the best evidence for survival could be accommodated in terms of

> paranormal phenomena; and more specifically in the communications purportedly from particular minds surviving discarnate, who appear to be

> either themselves employing a medium's or automatist's organs of utterance, or to be conveying their thoughts telepathically to the medium, who then utters them.[37]

Ducasse's initial objection is the familiar, and arguably insufficient one, that the amount of living-agent psi required is more than one may justifiably posit.[38] Ducasse writes,

> … in order to account for certain of the occurrences that invite most strongly the survival hypothesis, ESP would not be enough; nor even 'super' ESP in the sense of capacity to perceive extrasensorily physical and mental facts more hidden, numerous, slight, detailed, or distant in time or/and space than ESP is yet independently known to be capable of doing. What would be needed in addition would be something different from ESP in *kind*, not simply in degree.[39]

Then, as an example of a case resisting a living-agent-psi interpretation, he cites the ostensible possession of Lurancy Vennum reported in the so-called *Watseka Wonder* case.[40] He begins by noting that

> … the 'possession' hypothesis is that the mind of the deceased, which did have the skill to converse in that language, takes temporary possession of the medium's *bodily instruments of communication*; that is, of the medium's organs of speech and of writing and of audition; and that *the mind of the deceased* then employs those organs to converse with the sitter in the language *L* which that mind knew and still knows, but which the medium still does not know. That the words of language L are uttered by *the vocal organs* of the medium's body does not presuppose that *the medium* has gained command of the language *L*, any more than does the fact that two persons far apart in space employ a telephone to converse together presupposes that *the telephone* has gained command of the language they use![41]

Next, Ducasse make some contentious and not clearly relevant remarks about whether skills can be acquired paranormally—contentious because they overlook the fact that the issue in question concerns, not the *acquisition* of skills, but rather their *manifestation*, and as we know from cases of savants and prodigies (which Ducasse neglects to mention), prodigious skills can be manifested without prior practice. Moreover, the Watseka case concerns more than the manifestation of anomalous skills; it also involves the apparent persistence of memories and character traits. But then, Ducasse gets to the heart of the matter, and his remarks deserve to be quoted at length.

> The crucial question as regards the Watseka case is whether it is possible, or not possible, for a person *P* to identify himself unmistakably to another person *Q* who had known him intimately for years, by means of his behavior and of the contents, style, allusions, and responsiveness of his conversation with *Q*. That it is not possible in only an hour or two is probably true. But in the Watseka case, the Roffs had three and a half months of day-long close observation of the behavior, tastes, skills, knowledge, and capacity to make and understand allusions to intimate family matters, possessed by the personality which was

> expressing itself through the body of Lurancy during those months. And the Roffs testified that those traits were the very same as those which had together been distinctive of their deceased daughter Mary, whom Lurancy had never known.
>
> Let Donmeyer suppose that a young woman who remains constantly masked and muffled somehow comes and lives in his house; and let him ask himself whether he thinks it would be possible for that woman, through facts perceived extrasensorily, to enact for three and a half months convincingly to him the part of his own daughter, if that woman's personality were not really that of his daughter.
>
> An affirmative answer would amount to saying that no way ultimately exists by which it would be possible for a person whose face and figure have been disfigured by acid or by fire, to prove his identity to another who had known him intimately for many years. And this, I submit, is virtually beyond belief.[42]

Recommended Reading

Ducasse's parapsychological writings are spread out over many papers and books. Apart from recommending, *A Critical Examination of the Belief in a Life After Death*, the best advice would be to sample his various articles according to one's interest in the topics they address. The list of references below can serve as a guide.

Stephen E Braude

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. See, for example, his books Ducasse (1929; 1951a; 1968) and also Hare & Madden (1975).
- 2. Ducasse (1961).

- 3. Ducasse (1961), 156.
- 4. Ducasse (1961), 141.
- 5. Ducasse (1961), 141.
- 6. Hare & Madden (1975), 167.
- 7. Ducasse (1951a; 1953).
- 8. Ducasse (1961), 203.
- 9. Ducasse (1951b).
- 10. Ducasse (1954a), 819.
- 11. Ducasse (1958), 22, (italics in original).
- 12. Ducasse (1951b), 20.
- 13. Ducasse (1954b), 20.
- 14. Ducasse (1954b), 10.
- 15. For examples, see Braude (1997); Inglis (1977; 1984).
- 16. Ducasse (1954b), 5 (italics in original).
- 17. Ducasse (1956), 144-45.
- 18. Ducasse (1954a), 823.
- 19. Luria (1987).
- 20. See Grosso (2016) and Dingwall (1962a).
- 21. Ducasse (1954), 823.
- 22. Quoted in Hare & Madden (1975), 173-74.
- 23. See Braude (1997); Dingwall (1962b); Inglis (1977).
- 24. Ducasse (1954b), 15 (italics in original).
- 25. Ducasse (1954b), 15 (italics in original).
- 26. Ducasse (1956), 142.
- 27. Ducasse (1956), 143.
- 28. Ducasse (1956), 143-44.
- 29. Ducasse (1959), 388.
- 30. Ducasse (1959), 393.
- 31. Broad (1962), 417.
- 32. Ducasse (1964), 565-66 (italics in original).
- 33. Ducasse (1951a), 411.
- 34. Ducasse (1951a), 411-12 (italics in original).
- 35. Ducasse (1951a), 412.
- 36. Donmeyer (1965).
- 37. Quoted in Hare & Madden (1975) from an only partially published manuscript. The published portion appeared in 'The Watseka Evidence', *Pacific Philosophy Forum* 3 (1965), 104-6.
- 38. For challenges to that claim, see Braude (2003); Sudduth (2016).
- 39. Hare & Madden (1975), 180 (italics in original).
- 40. Stevens (1887).
- 41. Hare & Madden (1975), 180 (italics in original).
- 42. Hare & Madden (1975), 181.