

Joseph Glanvill

Joseph Glanvill, a seventeenth century clergyman and member of the Royal Society, was one of the first intellectuals to take a scientific interest in paranormal claims.

Life

Joseph Glanvill was born in Plymouth in 1636. He studied at Oxford University, attending Exeter College from 1652 to 1655, before migrating to Lincoln College where he stayed until 1657. As a minister in the Church of England he held a number of livings – rector of Wimbush, Essex; vicar of Frome Selwood, Somerset; rector of Street and Walton, also in Somerset – before he was appointed rector of the Abbey Church, Bath in 1666. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in December 1664, following the publication of his work *Scepsis Scientifica*, which he dedicated to the society. In 1672 he was made a chaplain in ordinary to King Charles II, and in 1678 prebendary of Worcester Cathedral. He lived in Bath until his death in 1680.

Scientific Examination of the Supernatural

The twentieth-century ghost hunter [Harry Price](#) thought that Joseph Glanvill could justly be regarded as the ‘father of psychical research’ in Britain.¹ His interest in applying the nascent scientific thought to supernatural phenomena marked a new approach among writers on the subject. In a dedicatory epistle to his account of the poltergeist-type phenomenon at John Mompesson’s house in North Tidworth (addressed to the man who proposed his membership of the Royal Society, Lord Brereton) Glanvill suggested that, alongside the society’s other branches of investigation, the same approaches could be used to compile a natural history of the supernatural.

And did the *SOCIETY* of which your Lordship is an illustrious Member, direct some of its *wary*, and *luciferous* enquiries towards the *World of Spirits*, I believe we should have other kinds of *Metaphysics* ... [thus]... a *Cautious*, and *Faithful History* [could be] made of those *certain* and *uncommon appearances*.²

Although the Royal Society never undertook a natural history of the supernatural, it did display some interest in examining matters of this nature. Indeed, during its early years the Royal Society did not regard such researches as incongruous with its wider enquiries. Glanvill himself undertook investigations into local matters that would nowadays broadly fall under the remit of psychical research, in response to queries from other members of the Royal Society. His non-credulous view of such phenomena can be seen in his replies on these subjects. Two queries he looked into concerned the Mendip Lead Mines. Asked whether divining rods had in fact been used to locate the ore, and whether any of the miners had witnessed a ‘subterraneous Daemon’, Glanvill verified that, as far as the long-serving workmen were concerned, there was no substance to either of these ideas. The other matter

concerned claims of magical powers associated with the Springs at Bath, about which he expressed a healthy scepticism.³

Evidence and Reason

While often referred to as a 'sceptic', Glanvill himself used the term less in the modern sense of 'disbeliever' than in the sense of rigorously applying scientific standards in order to discover the truth.⁴ For Glanvill, the use of reason is paramount, leading to a correct deduction of the nature of the world around us. Moreover, reason is divinely given by God and is 'as much the voice of God, as if in so many words it were clearly expressed in the written Revelations'.⁵ He considered that people came to erroneous conclusions for a number of reasons: superficial examination of the evidence, 'fallacies of the imagination', the tendency of human attachments to warp individual's judgements, precipitancy, and the unreliability of the human senses. Human judgment is ultimately more fallible than our sensory data, he considered. ⁶

The importance of empirical evidence in determining the truth or falsity of a claim was vital to Glanvill's methodology. Paradoxically, as a modern sceptic would see it, this led him to criticize the reasoning of those who argued against the existence of supernatural phenomena. Those who disbelieved in witchcraft and ghosts denied the evidence, he suggested, as 'public Records have been kept of these well-attested Relations'.⁷ In Glanvill's approach to the supernatural, first-hand testimony by persons of good standing provided the basic evidence for such phenomena. For Glanvill, to reject such evidence was the more credulous course, as it meant that

the sound Senses of multitudes together may deceive them; and Laws are built upon Chimera's [sic]; that the gravest and wisest judges have been Murderers [ie those who sentenced people to death under witchcraft legislation]; and the sagest Persons Fools, or designing Imposters ...⁸

In short, for Glanvill, to reject the reality of supernatural phenomena in the face of empirical evidence is an example of dogmatic assertion over reason.⁹

Anti-Sadducism Agenda

While Glanvill's work was imbued with the scientific philosophy of the age, it was not this alone that motivated him to investigate reports of what we would today term paranormal activity. He also saw such activity providing evidence for the existence of the supernatural, reinforcing beliefs of the Christian Faith.

Radical religious ideas circulated during the Civil Wars and Commonwealth period, from atheism to universalism and the denial of Hell. A broad selection of these beliefs was outlined in Thomas Edwards' *Gangraena*. In an atmosphere of growing scepticism towards traditional Christian tenets, philosophers, among them the Cambridge Neo-Platonist Henry More, tried to fashion 'a natural philosophy that would protect traditional Anglican theologies, and the orthodoxies that went with it'.¹⁰ Those who denied elements of supernatural belief were described as Sadducees, after the Jewish priests in the New Testament who rejected beliefs such as the existence of angels and the resurrection of the dead.

The denial of the existence of spirits was seen as the thin end of a wedge that led ultimately to atheism, an idea that found forceful expression in More's dictum 'No Spirits, No God'.¹¹ Glanvill echoed More's ideas, speaking of a 'chain of connexion', where disbelief in ghosts and witches - as the lowest section of the chain - ultimately resulted in disbelief in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul.¹² Because of the danger that denying the supernatural might lead to disbelief in key tenets of Christian doctrine, Glanvill saw his writings on the subject as:

necessary for our Age, in which *Atheism* is begun in *Sadducism*. And those that dare not bluntly say, There is NO GOD, content themselves, (for a fair *step*, and *Introduction*) to deny there are *SPIRITS*, or *WITCHES* ... And therefore how little so ever I care what men believe, or teach in matters of opinion, I think I have reason to be concern'd in an affair, that toucheth so near upon the greatest interests of Religion.¹³

John Wagstaffe refuted the idea of a 'chain of connexion' in *The Question of Witchcraft Debated*, arguing with rhetorical force that any idea of the denial of the existence of spirits ultimately leading to atheism was an 'error so gross, that it doth not deserve a confutation' pointing out that the Sadducees in the New Testament still believed in God, despite denying the existence of other supernatural beings.¹⁴ But for Glanvill and his circle, all the various elements of the system of the supernatural were seen as interrelated, to the extent that bolstering the belief in spirits would ultimately reinforce the other elements, including the existence of the supreme spirit, God.¹⁵

Writings about Ghosts and Witches

Glanvill first wrote on the subject of supernatural phenomena in *A Philosophical Endeavour towards the Defence of the Being of Witches and Apparitions* in 1666. In the words of H Stanley and IML Redgroves, the work was 'mainly a criticism of *a priori* objections to the possibility of witchcraft and of what we should now call psychic phenomena.'¹⁶ The impression was largely destroyed in the same year by the Great Fire of London,¹⁷ and so a new edition of the work appeared the following year under the title *Some Philosophical Considerations Touching the Being of Witches*. In 1668 an enlarged edition was printed, and this too went through two impressions, now entitled *A Blow at Modern Sadducism*. As well as Glanvill's arguments for the existence of what later ages would term paranormal phenomena from the earlier versions, *A Blow at Modern Sadducism* contained Glanvill's account of the Drummer of Tedworth, which he investigated himself, visiting the house where the alleged poltergeist phenomenon occurred and taking statements from eye witnesses. The book was popular, but not universally well regarded: the diarist Samuel Pepys described it as 'well writ, in good style, but methinks, not very convincing'.¹⁸ A revised version of the first section of the work was also included in Glanvill's 1676 *Essays on Several Important Subjects*, which provides an overview of his mature thought. Five of the collection's seven essays are revised versions of arguments he presented in previous publications.

At the time of his death in 1680, Glanvill had for several years been planning an expanded version of *A Blow at Modern Sadducism*, including reports of cases he had been collecting. Henry More edited and compiled this material – probably supplementing it with material of his own – to produce *Saducismus Triumphatus* in 1681. The work went through five editions between 1681 and 1700, with a sixth edition being put to press as late as 1726. A German translation was made in 1701.

Reaction to Glanvill

Reaction to the books varied. Those who supported the anti-Sadducean agenda warmly welcomed Glanvill's work.¹⁹ It was the first sustained investigation of supernatural phenomena published after the Restoration of King Charles II. Although it must be acknowledged that Henry More's works in the 1650s, such as *An Antidote to Atheism*, had also touched on similar areas and no doubt influenced other works that examined cases of ostensibly paranormal activity, such as Richard Baxter's 1681 tome *Certainty of the World of Spirits*, and Richard Bovet's 1684 work *Pandaemonium*. The American minister Cotton Mather's 1693 *Wonders of the Invisible World*, which included the famous account of the Salem Witch trials, may also be said to belong to the genre that multiplied in the wake of Glanvill's work. At a popular level, ballads and chapbooks dealing with apparitions and related subjects proliferated during the Restoration period.

Glanvill's works were not universally lauded. John Webster thought it contained 'old wives fables of apparitions and goblins'.²⁰ However despite his fierce criticisms Webster did not disbelieve the whole range of phenomena described in the clergyman's work. As well as apparitions, Webster believed in concepts such as the weapon's salve, the idea that a wound might be cured by a herbal preparation applied to the weapon that caused it. Historian Thomas Jobe suggests that Webster's critique of More and Glanvill was motivated by fear that those who, like himself, were interested in potentially 'occultic' areas of experimental science, might be accused of witchcraft.²¹

Case Studies

Glanvill corresponded with many people, by which means he acquired descriptions of cases that would nowadays be classified as psychical research. A large number of these were printed in *Saducismus Triumphatus*. As Owen Davies points out, Glanvill, and others such as Richard Baxter and Richard Bovet, relied 'heavily on empirical and biblical evidence to maintain their defence ... [seeking] to prove their case by the sheer weight of personal testimony'.²² Although Henry More would probably not have employed the scientific language of evidence, his *Antidote Against Atheisme* is littered with alleged incidents of paranormal activity, because he believed such narratives helped to re-enforce faith in the supernatural: 'it is not to be imputed to any vain credulity of mine, or that I take a pleasure in telling strange stories, but that I thought fit to fortify and strengthen the faith of others'.²³

There seemed to be no want of first-hand stories of the supernatural; writing to Glanvill, More claimed it was by God's providence that examples of ghosts and

other phenomena kept appearing, in order to awaken people's minds to the possibility of the existence of the supernatural.²⁴

Indeed, the quality of the stories was a particular concern. Glanvill scrupulously sifted the evidence he found and interpreted it by his own standards. As he wrote to fellow Royal Society member Robert Boyle on 7th October 1677: 'I am very careful to inform myself of all particulars of those stories I use, to prevent cavils; and that occasions many letters and enquiries, which have much retarded my business: but I make what haste I safely can, and take care not to make too much'.²⁵ James Collins in his publisher's Preface to *Saducismus Triumphatus* states that only those accounts were included that 'seemed very well attested and highly credible... and such, as rightly understood, contain nothing but what is consonant to right Reason and sound Philosophy'.²⁶ Indeed, folklorist Gillian Bennett has lamented that Glanvill filtered out accounts he did not consider credible and thus deprived posterity of the much wider range of supernatural tales from this period that might otherwise have come down. But this does illustrate how cautious Glanvill was in interpreting the material he collected.

John Newton

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Price (2012).
- [2](#). Glanvill (1668), 94.
- [3](#). Stanley & Redgroves (1921), 52.
- [4](#). Glanvill (1676), 44.
- [5](#). Glanvill (1676), 1.
- [6](#). Glanvill (1676), 3.
- [7](#). Stanley & Redgroves (1921), 64.
- [8](#). Glanvill (1662), 116.
- [9](#). Glanvill (1665), 78.
- [10](#). Clarke (1997), 300.
- [11](#). Moore (1653), 64.
- [12](#). Glanvill (1681), 4. It should be noted Glanvill saw this as a psychological construct in people's minds.
- [13](#). Glanvill (1668), sig. A5r – A6r.
- [14](#). Wagstaffe (1669), i-ii.
- [15](#). Cited in Bath & Newton (2006), 1-14.
- [16](#). Stanley & Redgroves (1921), 6.
- [17](#). Wood (1813-1820), 1244.
- [18](#). Pepys (1666).
- [19](#). Casaubon (1668), 42.
- [20](#). Webster (1677), 42.
- [21](#). Jobe (1981), 346.
- [22](#). Davies (2010), xlii.

- [23.](#) In Levine (1992), 98.
- [24.](#) Bath & Newton (2006), 6. See also Bennett (1987), 79.
- [25.](#) Boyle (1744), 628.
- [26.](#) Glanvill (1681), sig. A3v.

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