

The Nature of the Anomalous Experience

A Critique of Anomalistic Psychology



Hieronymus Bosch, detail from 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' (1490-1510, Prado Madrid)

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Abstract

Explanations of anomalous experience root in two opposing ontological models. One either assumes the existence of something like a paranormal reality (the 'other world' hypothesis) or one denies this and asserts that this reality is nothing more than a projection of the human mind (the 'projection' hypothesis). Anomalistic psychology is the branch of psychology that tries to explain (belief in) anomalous experience from the latter model. In this essay its central explanations are presented and criticized, the main critique being the reductionist ontological assumption underlying these explanations. The discussion then moves to some ontological and epistemological issues related to the 'other world' approach. It is concluded that this approach provides a far richer, even necessary, but also very challenging path to understanding the anomalous.

1) Introduction

We live in an extremely materialistic world. Some time ago the following ad appeared in the newspaper: 'What is Love? An Exploration of Scientific Insights'.¹ It referred to a course week where scientists of different backgrounds will discuss the issue. A historian will look at historic changes in the concept of love. A clinical psychologist will describe the problems love can cause in relationships. A philosopher of law will relate the phenomenon to the working of laws and regulatory principles in society. A biologist will be discussing the physiological parameters of love (survival instinct), and so on. They all will relate love to some-thing, nobody seems to relate it to itself. The latter would mean, I guess, discussing the intrinsic quality of love or the spirit quality so you will. Such an approach is apparently not considered scientific. Yet, the ad was illustrated with a detail from Hieronymous Bosch' painting 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' (see cover page), a painting in which this spirit quality is literally all over the place. So the magic is still there, but it has gone underground. Probably doing its compensatory work as Jung would put it (Jung, 1971).

About fifteen years ago, during and after a period of personal crisis, I started having experiences that were new to me. There are many concepts around to describe these experiences, such as metaphysical, occult, paranormal, extrasensory, psi, anomalous or delusional, to name just a few. In this essay I will alternately speak of anomalous and paranormal experiences, hereby referring to experiences that (seem to) go beyond ordinary sense perception.

Research shows I'm not alone; many people have anomalous experiences. In a recent self-report study in the UK 48% of the respondents reported they had ever sensed that a friend or family member was in trouble. 36% of the sample reported premonitions of events that yet had to take place. 22% reported they had sensed or seen a ghost at some point. 10% reported an out-of-body experience. 52% of the sample never experienced any of the eight anomalous experiences presented to them. 48% reported one or more of the eight experiences, 26% two or more, 13% three or more and 6% four or more (Pechey & Halligan 2012:155). So these experiences are quite common in a general (i.e. a non-clinical) population, whereas the number of people reporting diverse and multiple experiences is smaller. Still, even in a materialistic Western society as the UK more than a quarter of the population reports having multiple anomalous experiences in their lives (so far).

¹ The ad appeared in the Dutch newspaper NRC-Handelsblad, on February 24, 2014.

In this essay I will explore the nature of these 'unseen' realities and the way they are perceived. These two issues are closely related. For example, discussing extrasensory perception (ESP) is only relevant to those who consider the metaphysical reality as a separate ontological sphere. Those who do not believe there is such a separate sphere, will find this concept irrelevant.

On the most general level we find opposing ontological viewpoints: one either assumes that there is a separate reality that can somehow be experienced (the 'other world' hypothesis) or one assumes that this reality is nothing more than the projection of another reality, the reality of the human mind (the 'projection' hypothesis). In the second case the nature of the metaphysical reality is logically related to and totally explained by the nature of human perception and more generally the working of the human mind. In the first case, the relation between the two is less obvious. In this case there's a world 'out there' which functioning is not or at least not entirely dependent on the human state of affairs.

In paragraph 2 I will discuss the explanations given for (belief in) paranormal experience by proponents of the projection hypothesis. This is the dominant view in modern science, specifically in the field of anomalistic psychology. In paragraph 3 I will criticize this approach lending arguments from the other-world hypothesis. In paragraph 4 I will discuss some issues and questions with regard to the ontology and epistemology of this other world approach. In reflecting on the different ideas I will refer to my own experiences, and I will do so in two ways. On the one hand I will use the literature to give meaning to my personal experiences, on the other hand I will use these experiences as a tacit test of the literature.

2) Anomalous Experience as Product of the Human Mind

Modern science is confronted with an interesting paradox: on the hand it proves extremely difficult, not to say impossible, to empirically prove the existence of metaphysical realities under experimental conditions, while on the other hand it is confronted with persistent claims to the contrary and with the fact that so many people (still) believe in these realities, as polls keep showing (Gallup 2005). A problem that was already recognized by Aristotle, when he remarked that it is difficult either to ignore the evidence or to believe it (Dodds 1973: 176-177).

As already mentioned the mainstream position is that paranormal phenomena are created by humans. Anomalistic psychology is the discipline studying the explanations for this creation. It asks the question: why do people belief in paranormal phenomena? Psychologists have come up with a range of explanations. Irwin (2009) distinguishes four main hypotheses:

- social marginality
- world view
- psychodynamic functions
- cognitive deficits

Research shows that economic and social marginality are correlated with belief in the paranormal. This is shown with a wide range of indicators: people who do well are less inclined to belief in the paranormal. In itself this empirical fact does not give us an explanation. It is assumed that people in deprived circumstances (of whatever nature) are more in need of appealing to this reality. Irwin rightly states that this is a problematic explanation since the majority of people dó believe in paranormal phenomena.

The worldview hypothesis explains belief in the paranormal by a fundamental subjectivist attitude in people. This can come from religion or any other belief system. Irwin asserts that this hypothesis is also problematic, because people who believe in the paranormal can at the same time believe in objective science. He thinks the world view hypothesis can best be reinterpreted in terms of psychological vulnerability to aspects of life that are beyond human control.

Psychodynamic functions are understood in more or less the same way. Belief in the paranormal serves a psychological purpose: to deal with an uncertain world, to protect us from a world that is beyond our control or a world that can be cruel to us. There are many research findings pointing to personality factors related to belief in the paranormal, such as anxiety, narcissism, fantasy proneness, et cetera.

The cognitive deficits hypothesis is probably the most well known. Cognitive deficits refer to pathological and non-pathological conditions of the delusional mind. The former refers generally to psychiatric conditions in which people have distorted perceptions of reality (dissociation, psychosis, paranoia, et cetera). The latter variant refers to such phenomena as magical thinking (seeing relationships that are not there), mental imagery (projecting mind in physical reality), personal validation effect (thinking something is true because it has personal meaning) and other forms of cognitive bias. In general: one is influenced by internal or external factors to come to illogical conclusions (Marks 1988:334). Low intelligence is also considered to attribute to this process. In recent years brain research has shown neurological factors to be correlated with belief in the paranormal (for example dopamine levels). Irwin states that the cognitive deficits hypothesis is often used in a polemic way and that it can be criticized on empirical grounds. He does admit however that differences exist in cognitive functioning of believers and non-believers, referring to such phenomena as reasoning styles and creativity.

Outside the academic psychology we can find some additional explanations of anomalous experiences, the most popular one being fraud, fiercely advocated by skeptics such as James Randi. Another group of explanations goes beyond the possible distortions of the human mind, explaining paranormal experience by anomalous variation in natural phenomena (it wasn't a UFO from outer space flying in the air, but a weather balloon).

In short, anomalistic psychology presumes that paranormal reality in itself does not exist. It is the result of mental or psychological activity within humans. In the next paragraph I will criticize this approach.

3) A critique of the Projection Hypothesis

Anomalistic psychologists are clearly struggling with the fact that the anomalous experience, despite the overwhelming 'anecdotal' evidence, cannot be measured in a controlled way to establish predictable facts. Hence the strong focus on the question whether these experiences can actually be 'true'. The measurement problem is implicitly transferred into an ontological statement about the non-existent nature of paranormal reality: because we can't measure it, it can't exist. This is in my view the biggest problem with the way anomalistic psychology approaches the phenomenon, and it causes some other problems as well. Let's take a closer look.

By denying metaphysical reality psychologists are automatically drawn to the idea that something must be wrong when people believe in something that doesn't exist. We see this reflected in the explanations presented in the previous paragraph. Radin (2005) summarized the main hypotheses in anomalistic psychology under the headings of ignorance, deprivation and deficiency. So people experiencing or believing in paranormal phenomena are described as either ignorant, deprived or

deficient. One might also add imaginative to the list. This brings to light a strong normative bias underlying these explanations. A bias modern scientists, according to the rules of the game, are to leave out.² This implicit normative dimension is even more problematic when we consider the number of people having these experiences. As we already saw many people, not just a deprived or crazy little bunch, report them. And they do so not only in our place and time, but in all cultures of all ages.

Furthermore, the correlates found in the research are congruent with divergent hypotheses. Again we see the normative dimension playing out. So if lower educated people believe in paranormal reality more often than the higher educated, it is assumed that they do so because they are compensating for some socio-economic or even psychological deprivation. One can also hypothesize that these people are more connected with the intangible realms, because they have been less influenced by the dominant ontological perspective in modern science. Another example is the correlation between imagination and belief in the paranormal. It is assumed from this that believers are suffering from a general lack of realism or as some studies put it: a fantasy proneness (Irwin 2009:89-90). We can interpret the same finding in a different way: imagination might be considered an important instrument for experiencing unseen realities. In short, the correlates found in the research do not prove or disprove anything, they can be used to substantiate all kinds of explanations, depending on the ontological assumptions.

The presumption that something intangible (and behaving according to laws we already know) can not be considered real, reflects a very reductionist view. One might ask the question if someone can believe in something that doesn't exist, for if a person believes in something, this 'something' is or at least has become a reality. A reality that can furthermore produce all kinds of tangible consequences. The famous Thomas Theorem is referring to this property when it states: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas 1928). The empirical validity of this can be seen in all areas of life (think of placebo-effects and the like).

By sticking to the tangible as the only category of reality a great deal of what constitutes everyday human life is placed outside the scope of study. Even the great enlightenment philosopher and fundamental critic of spirit-philosophy Immanuel Kant did not go this far. He acknowledges this other reality but discusses the fallacies involved in studying it within a scientific framework. He argues that claims about paranormal experience cannot be discussed in a rational framework, because the truth of the experience cannot be established outside the person having the experience. The same can be said for the interpretation of the experience. Apart from any delusion of sense, people may misinterpret experiences or make illogical deductions from it. And since the knowledge that comes out of that is founded on the unverifiable reality of unique experience, Kant proposes to keep these kinds of experiences outside the scientific endeavour (Cornelius Undated).

Where Kant was still thinking about the epistemological problems related to gaining knowledge from paranormal experiences, his contemporaries in anomalistic psychology seem to have put aside the question altogether. This has far-reaching consequences because it desensitizes us from intangible but nevertheless very real aspects of life. The symbolical qualities of reality, whether these are ideas, dreams, signs or ghosts, are considered not to exist or to be unreal.

Summing up, I find the explanations put forward by anomalistic psychology not very illuminating. The prevailing measurement problems have led to ontological statements that are extremely reductionistic, leading to highly normative explanations of a phenomenon that is actually something

² One way to get around the normativism would be to ask the reverse question why not all people experience (or believe in) paranormal phenomena.

else than I'm interested in: focusing on belief in paranormal reality instead of focusing on the reality itself. As Kripal (2010:17) puts it: 'as if real scholarship can only proceed by denying the reality of that which it claims to study.'

Of course the psychologists would object this, alleging that the reality is that of my inner ignorance, deprivation or deficit. And if I put myself in their shoes I would certainly be able to determine that my experiences arose in a period of psychological turbulence. I might have been in a desperate need for help 'from above', thus creating these projections. I am also somebody with a very vivid imagination. And sometimes I do have illogical thoughts. So yes, it is possible that these experiences came and come from my own mind. At the same time I can think of numerous questions and arguments that challenge these explanations, but the single most important argument to reject them is the fact that they don't address a fundamental aspect of the experience, i.e. the 'otherness' of the perceived reality. For this, I think it's necessary to turn to a form of knowledge that doesn't deny this reality.

4) Some Thoughts on the Ontology and Epistemology of the Other World Hypothesis

Underlying anomalistic psychology is an ontological model that presumes two kinds of realities or ontological worlds: the world of the senses and the world of reason. Truth arises from the combination of the two: the internal validity (or internal truth) of a theory is established by reference to its logical or mathematical qualities, the external validity (or external truth) is based on its correspondence to the empirical world, i.e. the world of the senses. My experiences do not fit into this model. An ontological world seems to be missing, that of soul, feeling or imagination.

The French philosopher Corbin (1972) speaks of a 'Mundis Imaginalis' when he refers to this ontological reality. To him this world connects the other two. In modern language the word imagination has connotations to the imaginary or to fantasy, but for Corbin the world of imagination has a cognitive function (noetic value), otherwise it wouldn't be able to connect the world of ideas to the world of senses and vice versa. He defines this world as that of the subtle bodies: less materialistic than the physical world, but more material than the abstract world of ideas, because it knows extension and dimension.

The description of the nature of this world by the German Theologian Rudolf Otto appeals particularly to me. Otto (1917:5-7) speaks of an unknowable, holy world that he coins Numen (divine world), hereby referring to a separate ontological world (a totally 'other world'), that is outside the senses, irrational, and irreducible to these other worlds. This world is mysterious and therefore terrifying and fascinating at the same time. These three aspects, the experience of 'otherness' and the accompanying feelings of fascination and terror, perfectly describe my personal experiences.

There's a very rich literature about the nature of things in the Mundus Imaginalis that I will not further discuss. Instead I want to focus on two specific issues that arise from describing this world, one concerning the suggested divine nature and one concerning agency.

Like many writers on the 'other world' Otto was a theologian. This means that in the concepts God or the divine is never far away. I wonder whether this is just a disciplinary bias, theologians logically start from God-concepts,³ or whether the divine is an indispensable part of this world. I don't know. What I do know is that in my personal case religious feelings that I didn't have before, came into my life after the anomalous experiences had started (I never went looking for them, they came my way). To me it is unclear how these things are related. I see two options: the first one is that the divine, or

³ In pre-enlightenment philosophy religion was also unavoidable in the background.

the numinous as Otto calls it, is an intrinsic part of the world of imagination. This would imply that experience of this world connects us in some way to the divine. The other option is that the religious experience is not formed in the world of imagination, but in another world (for example the world of reason). We may also presume a fourth ontological sphere, as many authors have done, a separate divine world. Wherever the ontological position of this divine world (if anywhere) and however we humans relate to it, the study of the experience of the divine, it seems to me, is epistemologically a different category from the study of human experience as such. Experiencing the paranormal is not necessarily experiencing the divine. In many sources I have consulted these categories are somehow intertwined. Maybe they can not be separated, but still I wonder what this will bring us.

Introducing a third and fourth ontological world confronts us with the question of agency. If we presume multiple ontological worlds, one may ask how they influence each other. Where is agency located? In modern empirical science, with its two worlds, this question is hardly on the table. The implicit assumption is most of the time a materialistic one: mind follows matter: high serotonin levels cause a person to become depressed, not the other way around. The 'Other world' hypothesis generally assumes that the lower ontological worlds are influenced by the higher ones, the world of the senses being the lowest world. If this is the case people don't *develop* thoughts (from matter), but they *receive* them (from the higher world of reason). This is of course not a new issue, but using richer ontological models do confront us more urgently with the question of agency, because there are more agents around. For example, many authors have positioned the world of reason above that of imagination. If this is the case, thoughts will steer our imagination. This implies that paranormal manifestations start in the world of thought (or in the divine world).⁴ Whatever the case may be, the issue of agency is hugely important to understand the nature of the imaginal and how it interacts with other ontological spheres. The example shows that the ontological assumption from anomalistic psychologists (it is all in the mind) might at some point even converge with ideas coming from much richer ontological models.⁵

If we distinguish the imaginal as a separate ontological world, we can ask ourselves how we can gain knowledge from it and what kind of knowledge. I will very briefly discuss these two questions as well.

If we presume different ontological worlds, each of them needs its own human instrument of perception or knowing about it. The material world can be known through the five senses of the human body. The world of reason can be known through human intellect. The imaginal world can be known through feeling or imagination (or as others will call it: a sixth sense, astral senses and the like). In modern science imagination is not considered a mode of knowing about the world. Its product is considered unreal, as opposed to reality or truth created by sense experiences. Writers of the 'Other world' hypothesis see it exactly the other way around: for them the five senses seem not a very exciting category to know about the world, since these can only know the material world. To understand life more fully the spiritual senses are far more important. Swedenborg (2009: no. 543) says that people who are too focused on whatever the senses bring to their life, force their spirits to identify with this world and they can not develop spiritually. Steiner (1947) follows up on this by saying that each instrument should only be used within its own world. He warns about thinking or speculating about paranormal experiences: '[Man] ought not to wish, in a speculating manner, to make out what this or that [paranormal experience - BR] means, but rather to allow the things themselves to inform him. It should be remarked that the artistic perception, when coupled with a quiet introspective nature, forms the best foundation for the development of occult faculties.'

⁴ This is precisely what James (1902) alleges.

⁵ The difference will certainly lie in the outcome of the process: in the first case something unreal is produced, in the second case the outcome is considered real, even in a material sense.

In classical Greek Philosophy the four elements describe the four worlds and the way of knowing about them:

- the world of earth (in humans: the world of the body - experienced by the senses)
- the world of water (in humans: the world of the soul - experienced by feelings/imagination)
- the world of air (in humans: the world of reason - experienced by thinking)
- the world of fire (in humans: the world of the divine spark - experienced by intuition)

The further away from the earth the less material the element becomes. So the human senses can experience only earthly matter, while intuition experiences the divine.

What kind of knowledge can be gained from the imaginal or soul world? Here we encounter Kant's problem that objective knowledge seems impossible. Following Kant's argument -as far as I have grappled it- I tend to agree. Notions of logical positivism, objectivism and causality, that came to rule science after Kant, are very problematic in trying to gain knowledge from the imaginal world. Logical positivism asks us to solely lean on sensory experience and logical theory or mathematics to gain valid knowledge about the world. Objectivism asks us to rely on truth statements that are general and can be shared. Causality presupposes time-space restrictions in relating events of the world. All these notions cause serious problems in the study of the imaginal and I see no other option than think about alternative epistemological strategies. As Jung for example has done with his contribution on synchronicity, thereby explaining relations between events bypassing the time-space restrictions of causality.

As far as I can judge it the notion of objectivism is posing the biggest problem for the study of the imaginal. If we let go of this notion, in whatever form, we literally lose all discourse. Truth becomes a concept without content, an individualized subjective property or a property based on some kind of (self proclaimed or attributed) authority. The thin line between experience and belief, already so prominent in the theological literature on the imaginal becomes even thinner. We might even come to the point that we ask ourselves what the epistemological difference between the two categories is. If we give up objectivism we reject the idea of (knowing about) general laws ruling the world. This is in every (traditional or modern) sense of the word an anti-scientific viewpoint. In my opinion we should never move in that direction, it would be counter-evolutionary. I think it's not necessary to reject the notion of objectivism, but it seems to me that (individual) subjectivism is an inevitable aspect of the process leading to objective knowledge.

To sum up, richer ontological models fit my personal experience far better than the limited model used by anomalistic psychology. But in gaining objective knowledge from these 'other worlds' a lot of epistemological issues and problems have to be solved. Kant's problem seems still fully on the table. To me the notion of objectivism poses the biggest challenge to the study of the imaginal. Letting go of this notion would mean the end of discourse, keeping it in confronts us with huge epistemological difficulties.

5) Concluding remarks

Starting from my own experiences I tried to find out whether anomalistic psychology provides me with useful insights about anomalous phenomena. My conclusion is that this not the case. The ontological model underlying this discipline is so limited that researchers are forced to shift their attention from the phenomena themselves to the belief in these phenomena. Theories using a richer ontological model fit my personal experience far better. They not only honor the reality of the experience, they are also able to provide meaning. C.S. Lewis (1979: 265) once said that 'reason is the organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning.' This gives us in one sentence an idea of

the epistemological challenges involved if we are to gain objective knowledge from the world of imagination. In this essay I have discussed some ontological and epistemological issues concerning the nature of the imaginal and the way we can study it. I fully realize I've done this from a very naive, unknowing position, since my knowledge of these matters is extremely limited. Nevertheless, I now realize that gaining objective knowledge from my personal experiences is quite a daunting enterprise.

McGilchrist's work on the brain makes it clear that humans have two very different ways of perceiving reality (McGilchrist 2009). One part (mainly the right hemisphere of the brain) perceives sameness, wholeness en connectedness. This is the part that is connected to the outer world. Information coming in on this side is processed to the left hemisphere of the brain, where language and analytical skills reside. Here the information is put into pieces and the focus shifts to seeing differences, making distinctions, et cetera.⁶ McGilchrist shows that the right hemisphere of the brain is leading, the left part is following. He asserts that in modern science the left hemisphere has become leading, ignoring the knowledge of the right hemisphere: the emissary has become the master. The knowledge of the right hemisphere, that would also include knowledge of the imaginal, is no longer seen as knowledge.

The reality of anomalistic psychology clearly illustrates McGilchrist's point. In working on this essay I wondered what could have driven this development towards reductionism and materialism. The answer I came up with is that of a need for control. This need originates in the existential insecurity of human life. It is a vital strategy to cope with this insecurity. Not only on the level of the individual, but also on the level of institutions and society as a whole. Logical positivism, the main scientific strategy that resulted from enlightenment, provides us with very powerful tools to control the world.

The ontology underlying this science is limited to worlds we can fully control (or at least we think we can): the world of the senses and the world of thought. This underlying principle of control is fully reflected in the rules and methodologies used. On a technical level the issue of control is vital to modern science. It needs to control realities in order to be able to say something about it. Think of double-blind randomized controlled trial (RCT) to isolate the working of a single causal factor.

Logical positivism gave rise to an enormous increase of our technological capabilities, thereby increasing our ability to control the (material!) world around us. But since these great technological inventions are the product of this underlying insecurity, they will probably not solve the problem. On the contrary, they most likely will amplify them. Hence creating a cycle that increases the need for control even more. The historical development within all technologically advanced societies in which the reality of the world has become smaller and more and more limited to the material plane, is illustrating this. Probably one or more crises are needed to get us out of this cycle, since these can help us to see through the illusion of control.

Kripal (2010) states that 'the paranormal is our secret in plain sight'. It is there, but we don't want to see it. And if we no longer can ignore it, we dismiss it by saying the experience is 'anecdotal', so not to be taken seriously. Jung would say that it might disappear from consciousness but that the psychological content is never lost. This takes us back to the Bosch painting: it shows us the garden of *earthly* delights. However, if we zoom out from this fragment we can see other worlds as well. But that of course would not have fitted the scientific approach of the course week on love. The chosen detail thus perfectly depicts this 'zoomed-in' quality of the program and of modern science in general.

⁶ This is an extremely crude summary.

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