

A Skeptical Believer

Cyril Burt

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Reviewed by JOHN SENDERS

Sir Cyril Burt, who died in 1971, was retired from his position as Professor of Psychology at University College, London, a post he had held for 20 years. A DSc of Jesus College (Oxford, England), Burt also taught at London Day Training College, subsequently the University of London Institute of Education. He was elected a Fellow of the British

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Academy and received knighthood in recognition of his work. Burt is author of numerous books, including The Gifted Child, Distribution of Educational Abilities, The Subnormal Mind, and The Psychological Study of Typography. Anita Gregory, who edited the Burt volume under review, is principal lecturer in psychology and philosophy at the Polytechnic of North London. She is coauthor with C. C. L. Gregory of Physical and Psychical Research: An Analysis of Belief and editor of L. L. Vasiliev's Experiments in Distant Influence.

John Senders, the reviewer, is Professor of Industrial Engineering at the University of Toronto. An AB of Harvard College in Experimental Psychology, Senders has held positions with the Aero-Medical Laboratory at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, with the Honeywell Corporation, at Brandeis University, and with NASA. He has contributed chapters to Henry Quastler's Information Theory in Psychology and to K. B. DeGreene's Psychological Factors in Systems. Senders is coeditor (with R. Monty) of Eye Movements and Psychological Processes.

I READ with considerable interest Burt's writings on the subject of ESP. While the question of whether ESP exists or not is of no concern to readers of *Contemporary Psychology*, the attitudes toward ESP of Burt, a psychologist of considerable reputation and sophistication in a number of fields, are. The most fascinating aspect of the book is the clear conflict in Burt's thinking between an intense desire to have ESP and associated psychic phenomena be real, and the cautiousness of a scientist, perhaps not too skilled in probability analysis but aware of the problems of it, in accepting the apparent "impossibilities" of various things that are reported by others to have happened. Of particular interest are his analysis of the probabilities of so-called "correspondences" and the courageous attempt to use, in an experimental way, information theory in estimating the likelihood that the reported phenomena could have been due to chance events. His experiments in information theory are very reminiscent of those using different

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levels of approximation of English in order to see how, with increasing statistical constraint, the random sequences resembled meaningful language output. What Burt did was to choose passages and words from a number of sources, arrange them in random order and then see whether, with the most liberal of interpretations, it would be possible to find "psychic" communication in them (from MacDougal, no less). His conclusion from the experiment was that the random events could not lead to the illusion of psychic communication. The question of "correspondences" hinges more on the problem of the probabilities to be attributed to various words in and out of context that ostensibly were known only to the "dead" communicator and to his or her colleagues, and that none the less appeared in the script of the automatic writers or in the speech of the entranced mediums. Here again, the results of the analysis strongly reject the notion of chance occurrence. Some of the other data reported are of interest.

Burt took a swipe at McCulloch and Pitts for their bold assertion that "the activities which we are wont to call 'mental' are rigorously deducible from neurophysiology" and complains that, among others, George Miller has never

done a first-hand investigation of his own. I don't know whether that is true.

I find myself left puzzled by the case of the curious checkerboard with only 48 squares (p. 29). In "Parapsychology and Its Implications" (p. 62), there is a discussion of the probable value of using twins as transmitter-receiver pairs in order to increase the probability of successful experimentation. A few pages later, there is a mention of the effects of dividing the hemispheres by cutting of the *corpus callosum* without what seems the obvious and immediate thought that information presented to one cerebral hemisphere should be very likely indeed to turn up in the other through whatever mechanisms ESP is supposed to use. Instead, in this most intimate of physical and twinning relationships, there seems to be no awareness on the part of the left of what the right hemisphere is doing. This raises one's doubts.

THE editor's introduction is a good and, I think, unbiased summary of Burt's attitudes and feelings toward ESP and related phenomena. Indeed, it is an introduction much better read than overlooked. There is no evidence of author collaboration with the editor.