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Obituaries

John Beloff

Scientist who put parapsychology on the academic map

The psychologist John Beloff, who has died aged 96, was known for initiating and nurturing the academic study of parapsychology in Britain. Born and educated in London, he was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who had settled near Hampstead Heath. He was the fourth of five children, one of his older brothers having died. After graduating from the University of London, he began working at the Architectural Association in Bedford Square, but he found it profoundly unsatisfactory. While serving in the army during the Second World War, he was impressed by JB Rhine's book, Extrasensory Perception, which described painstaking efforts to obtain experimental evidence for psychic functioning.

After the war, he turned his attention to psychology, and in 1952, he was appointed as a psychology student at London University, first at Birkbeck College and then at University College. After obtaining his doctorate in 1956, he was appointed to the psychology department at the University of Edinburgh, where he remained until his retirement in 1983.

Although parapsychology was an overriding interest, Beloff's first book, The Existence of Mind (1960), was a work in the philosophy of mind. Reacting against the analytical behaviourism of Gilbert Ryle's The Concept of Mind, Beloff defended a form of dualism, and he claimed that parapsychology provided evidence for that position. Although dualism was academically unfashionable, his book received favourable reviews, including one by AJ Ayer. It also attracted the attention of Rhine, who invited him to visit his laboratory in Durham, North Carolina, in 1955.

Beloff had already been conducting research in parapsychology. In 1951, he and a physics student, Leonard Evans, carried out an innovative experiment in psi-hypnosis (PK) that is, roughly, mind over matter. In this experiment, radioactive decay served as a source of randomness, and the object was to influence the radioactive source so that its particle emissions were non-random. This was the first instance of what later became a standard approach to PK research, and it marked an important advance over using more mathematically and physically complex objects for example, falling dice or coins as PK tar-

gets. Although the Beloff and Evans experiment yielded null results, their report has been cited more often than any of their experimental papers.

By the time Beloff visited Rhine, he was already acquiring a reputation as a parapsychological experimenter — that is, an experimenter whose presence seemed to influence the appearance of evidence for psychic functioning. None of his experiments yielded positive results.

However, as a scholar and teacher, Beloff was profoundly influential. From the start, Edinburgh supported his interest in the paranormal; several students wrote dissertations on parapsychology under his mentorship. In 1963, Beloff was nominated as an executor of the will of his friend Arthur Koestler. Koestler gave his entire estate to establish a chair of parapsychology, and Beloff took a key role in founding a university to accept the gift. In 1985, Edinburgh accepted the chair (reserved to the late Robert Morris) and, as a result, parapsychological research has continued here to this day.

Without doubt, Beloff's rigorous work in this area laid the groundwork for these subsequent developments.

In addition to many articles, Beloff wrote several books and edited others. His second book, Psychological Sciences (1974) was a text in mainstream psychology, although it had a chapter on parapsychology. This was followed by The Relentless Quest: Reflections on the Paranormal (1980) and Parapsychology: A Concise History (1991). During these years, he was also an active member of the Society for Psychical Research (1962), serving as council member, president in 1974 and 1975, and editor of the SPR's Journal and Proceedings for many years.

In an area where passions run high and opinions too often are guided by prejudice, Beloff relied on data and reason. He had no mystical inclination, and he demonstrated an even-handed approach to the evidence and its presentation. Although he never wrote a book on PK, he was familiar with the literature and had a keen interest in the subject.

Beloff was a collector of fine art and a supporter of voluntary euthanasia. He was always cheerful, and his friends shared his love of good food and good wine. He is survived by his wife of 54 years, Hana, who fostered a distinguished career for her in social psychology, his daughter Zoe and son Bruno.

Stephen Braude

John Beloff, psychologist, born April 19, 1920; died June 12, 2006.

While Beleoff's experiments failed, his teaching could be inspirational.