The problem of disenchantment: scientific naturalism and esoteric discourse, 1900-1939

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INTRODUCTION: HOW TO BECOME A SCIENTIST WHEN YOUR FIELD DOES NOT EXIST

At the close of the 1920s it seemed extremely unlikely that psychical research would ever be endorsed by a university, much less that resources would be granted to hire full-time faculty researchers, furnish laboratories, and even teach graduate students. Yet, this was about to happen. In the early 1930s the young psychology department at Duke University, North Carolina, would be home of a new set of experimental trials, conducted mainly by Joseph Banks Rhine (1895–1980), a botanist who had turned his interest to psychical phenomena a few years earlier. Rhine’s research at Duke grew into a full-blown research programme in what was about to be called parapsychology. By the end of the 1930s it would have its own peer-reviewed journals, and produce its own PhDs. For the first time, psychical researchers could call themselves professionals.

Keeping in mind the fragmentation of the 1920s, seeing no essential agreement among psychical researchers and a gradually more justified scepticism from academic psychology, this development looks very surprising indeed. How could it happen? While historical accounts of modern professional parapsychology typically start with Rhine as the founder, I suggest that we can only understand the establishment of parapsychology by looking at the activities of his supervisor, William McDougall. As I will argue in this chapter, it was McDougall who laid the foundations for the professionalisation of
psychical research.¹ How did he do it? Before we can start to answer this question we must be clear about what the challenge consisted in to begin with.

There were primarily two problems barring psychical research from becoming a professionalised discipline in the 1920s. The first of these was the “science internal” challenge that concerned us at length in the previous chapter: no compelling evidence, acquired with sound methods and capable of replication by others, had come to light after two generations of research. Even the best scientific reasons for giving the field attention were whimsical, elusive, and open to dispute. I have described this situation as a “non-paradigmatic” state: psychical research lacked a paradigm that made progressive “normal science” possible.² The lack of a paradigm in this sense was a serious problem for anyone who wished to argue that psychical research belonged in the university.

The second challenge faced by psychical research was of an externalist character. The very production of paradigms entails more than just establishing some internally consistent rational component: it also entails a social process embedded in a larger cultural context. To be effective, “paradigms” in the narrow sense³ must be shared by a community; while appeals to reason and good arguments will no doubt be important in the discourses that result in the acceptance or rejection of specific paradigms, the process in which that happens is itself essentially social. In these processes the narrow sense of “paradigm” links up with the second, broader sense identified by Kuhn: paradigms as a set of shared beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews.⁴ Linking these points together, psychical research needed to show not only that it possessed an internally consistent rationality, but also that it had a legitimate space within this broader structure of scientific, philosophical, cultural, and even political, concerns. It had to be justified by a broader socio-cultural paradigm. I shall argue that it is on this externalist level, rather than on the internal level of the discipline’s “rationality”, that we must look for an explanation of psychical research’s eventual professionalisation.

¹ I first put forward this argument in an article published in the Journal for the History of the Behavioral Sciences in 2010: see Asprem, ‘A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxologies’. The second section of the chapter is built on that article.
³ I.e. as authoritative exempla to be followed in scientific “puzzle-solving”, as explained in the previous chapter.
Taking a cue from the sociology of science, any discipline seeking professionalisation needs to successfully manage two sets of social strategies. On the one hand, the successful professionaliser must differentiate his or her field from competitors and answer to possible critics, through strategies of “boundary-work”.

On the other, one has to build networks and enlist significant allies, both in the form of influential persons and by taking part in significant discourses of broader public appeal. The latter is needed both in order to ensure continuity and to persuade significant others. It can be argued that all previous attempts at establishing psychical research ultimately failed in one or both of these two concerns. For example, the SPR was originally quite successful because it managed to keep firm boundaries against “unscientific” spiritualists, and build a very significant network of members and allies in fields ranging from the sciences to politics, reaching all the way to 10 Downing Street.

The fragmentation that followed in the second generation can thus be conceptualised as a collapse of the SPR’s boundary-work with the influx of spiritualism, and a partial collapse of its network, with the death of the influential founders. The death of founding fathers were, as we have seen, central in the fall of several other psychical research societies as well, most notably Schrenck-Notzing’s Munich laboratory, and the IMI in Paris.

This provides a framework for understanding the role of McDougall: my argument is that McDougall finally succeeded, both in erecting strong boundaries against competitors and other threats to the field’s legitimacy, and in networking the field to a number of highly relevant social, political, and scientific concerns. In the first and second section of the present chapter, we shall look at how this was done. Who

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5 Here I am referring to the concept developed by Thomas F. Gieryn, ‘Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science’; idem, ‘Boundaries of Science’; idem, Cultural Boundaries of Science; and expanded by David Hess, Science in the New Age.

6 This point is inspired by the actor-network theory, in particular as developed by Bruno Latour, Science in Action; idem, We Have Never Been Modern; idem, Pandora’s Hope; idem, Reassembling the Social. For relevant reviews of actor-network theory, see John Law and John Hassard, Actor Network Theory and After.

7 Arthur Balfour resided in number 10 at the turn of the century, and inaugurated an unbroken tradition of British Prime Ministers living there when he assumed office in 1902. Henry Sidgwick dined with Balfour in 10 Downing Street the night before he underwent unsuccessful surgery for cancer in May, 1900. He died three months later. See Gauld, Founders of Psychical Research, 315.
were the enemies, who were the allies, and what were the arguments? The first section will deal primarily with arguments defending the scientific legitimacy of psychical research, defending it against spiritualists, on the one hand, and sceptical voices from the academy, on the other. In the second I will continue to focus on the networking aspect: why was psychical research important? How could it contribute to science, society, and policy making? As we shall see, McDougall’s arguments for the field’s relevance made certain links that will look surprising when viewed with contemporary eyes. He appealed to scientific fields that were controversial even in the 1920s – including the Lamarckian theory of evolution and the science of eugenics – but whose political impact factor was undeniable. In the end I shall argue that it was precisely by knitting psychical research into a broader network of discourses with clear political, social, and also religious implications that McDougall finally succeeded in making room for the discipline in a university setting.

While McDougall laid the foundations and secured the institutional space, it was J. B. Rhine who finally filled that space with new lines of research that would become paradigmatic (in the narrow sense) to a new and professionalised disciplinary formation. In the third section, we shall have a look at Rhine’s work – both from an internalist and an externalist perspective. How did Rhine’s research relate to the quantitative research projects of his predecessors? With McDougall passing away in 1938, what were the strategies available to Rhine for defending and advancing the programme? In particular, we must look at how Rhine’s research was first received, how criticism was responded to, and not least, what he did to maintain the momentum that the discipline had suddenly gained in the mid-1930s.

By appreciating both the internal and external factors of disciplinary formation, we are finally in a position to understand the emergence of professional parapsychology in the 1930s. I will, however, conclude the chapter by suggesting that the case of parapsychology also has a deeper significance: it tells us something about the state of the academy as such during the period in question. Returning to the problem of disenchantment, I argue that McDougall and Rhine’s strategies to enforce parapsychology’s status were also a grand-scale mobilisation of “scientific” discourses of *enchantment*. Since universities have typically been seen as bastions of disenchantment, this is an important point: the professionalisation of parapsychology presents us with the case of a discipline finding room in a university not *despite*, but
because of the challenge it posed to disenchantment. I shall argue, however, that this was only possible due to the very specific cultural and political circumstances in which the events took place.

1 AGAINST AGNOSTICS, SCEPTICS, AND SPIRITUALISTS: THE BOUNDARY-WORK OF A CONSERVATIVE CONTRARIAN

We have already met William McDougall a number of times in the course of this study. We have seen that he was a leading psychologist of his generation, with a characteristically philosophical approach and a broad interdisciplinary vision, combining physiology and biology with psychology and mental philosophy. He had partaken in the Cambridge anthropological expedition to the Torres straits in 1898, as a physician and psychologist, while still in his twenties. His extremely successful textbook, *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908), helped define a generation of psychologists. Other publications attest to broad interests and erudition, as well as a distinctly philosophical style of working and a continuous interest in “Big Questions”. *Body and Mind* (1911) was a fresh attempt at addressing the old philosophical dilemma of mind/body dualism, discussing the relation between mechanism and teleology from a variety of philosophical and scientific perspectives. This book also included references to psychical research as supporting evidence for McDougall’s own dualistic thesis. Another major work, *The Group Mind*, was published in 1920, and was a significant contribution to the then popular field of “crowd psychology”. No doubt, this field was seen as particularly relevant at a time when modern democracy was still in the crucible, new mass-movements turned revolutionary, and cults of personality were rising from the passions of the people. Notably, McDougall speculated that psychical research might help explain some of the phenomena of crowd psychology: it could be, he argued, that

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8 For the scientific outcome of this expedition, see e.g. Richards, ‘Loss of Innocence in the Torres Straits’. For the report, published much later, in 1912, see Charles Hose, William McDougall, and A. C. Haddon, *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*.

9 This was already an established field of inquiry, however, and the biggest classic was already more than two decades old: Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896; original *La psychologie des foules*, 1895). Freud’s critique of Le Bon, however, only appeared after McDougall’s comprehensive volume, in 1921. See Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (German original: *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*).
faculties such as telepathy were involved in the rapid spread of popular sentiments that were seen during revolutions.\textsuperscript{10} His work on \textit{The Group Mind} was however also deeply infused with scientific racism, embodied in ideas about the “group minds” of nations, the formation of mental “characteristics” of different racial groups, and their relative worth and sophistication.\textsuperscript{11} Throughout the 1920s, McDougall increasingly appeared as a public intellectual, mixing his role as scientific professional in the field of psychology and his broad knowledge of other academic fields with an interest in ethics, politics, and moral problems, to produce numerous books on matters of broad public interest.\textsuperscript{12}

McDougall had, in short, played a crucial role in the formation of British psychology over the first two decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century; he had occupied positions at both Cambridge and Oxford, and worked as an explicit counterweight to the popularity of Freud and the psychoanalytic movement.\textsuperscript{13} When he emigrated to the United States in 1920, McDougall already possessed something of a guru status among psychologists in England. In stark contrast to his reputation and status at home, McDougall's years in America have been described rather as ‘a slow, if colourful, downward spiral’.\textsuperscript{14} Part of the downward spiral can be explained by changing tides in the theoretical superstructure of psychological research, especially in the United States. As seen in chapter five, McDougall was deeply involved in countering the new and fashionable current of behaviourism. But the biggest problem was self-inflicted: McDougall had a great appetite for controversial topics and contrarian views, and possessed a poorly hidden elitist spite for the masses. This earned him the epithet of ‘an American

\textsuperscript{10} McDougall, \textit{The Group Mind}, 28-30. While he considered this option, it should be noted that he did not in the end find it a very attractive hypothesis to explain the spread of emotions in crowds.

\textsuperscript{11} The book had chapters on topics such as 'The National Mind and Character’, ‘The Will of the Nation’, and a discussion of ‘Nations of the Higher Type’. For the whole section on national characteristics, see ibid., 96-199. Later chapters focused on the ‘Race-Making’ periods of a population group’s history, and the ‘Progress of Nations’. Ibid., 208-245, 270-301.

\textsuperscript{12} Of these we could mention the provocative \textit{Is America Safe for Democracy?} (1921), \textit{Ethics and Some Modern World Problems} (1924), \textit{Character and the Conduct of Life} (1927), \textit{World Chaos} (1931), \textit{Religion and the Sciences of Life} (1934), and \textit{The Riddle of Life} (1938). Some of these works will be discussed later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{13} A collection of McDougall’s criticisms of Freud and psychoanalysis, mostly published from the 1920s onwards, is found in McDougall, \textit{Psycho-Analysis and Social Psychology}.

\textsuperscript{14} Richards, ‘Defining a Distinctive British Psychology’, 655.
Nietzschean reactionary’ in the press, a characterisation that he appears to have worn with some pride.15

It may, however, be overly present-centred to insist that McDougall’s ‘colourful’ endeavours were doomed to failure. In the battle of behaviourism, for example, he posed a serious challenge for James B. Watson, and even won the public debate between the two that was hosted by the Psychology Club in Washington in 1924.16 All of the debates he entered into were deemed to be of great importance at the time, and their outcome seemed far from clear.

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McDougall arrived in Boston in 1920 to take up the prestigious professorship in psychology at Harvard previously held by William James and Hugo Münsterberg. The following year, he was made president of the American SPR. He could hardly have entered American psychical research at a more critical juncture: this was a time characterised by the resurgence of spiritualism, and an internal polarisation of its leading members, which was about to tear the ASPR to pieces. McDougall came to have a decisive impact on the outcome of the raging controversies. His actions as president strongly underscored the on-going bifurcation of the society. McDougall had little patience for spiritualist mediums or public demonstrations of their alleged powers, and sided clearly with the scientific wing of the ASPR. One of his first acts as president was to establish an Advisory Scientific Council, which included well-known sceptics such as Joseph Jastrow, John Edgar Coover, and Leonard Troland.17 Moreover, McDougall was not afraid of voicing his position in his capacity as president of the society, warning its members explicitly against flirtations with spiritualism. In his presidential address in 1922, McDougall opened bluntly, stating that ‘I have no message to bring you assuring you of the continued existence of the friends you have lost’. To this he added a sarcastic

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15 He mentions the incident in the foreword to McDougall, Ethics and Some Modern World Problems, viii. It refers to the reception of his controversial and provocative book, Is America Safe for Democracy?, published just after he came to the United States, in 1921. See also my discussion in the next section. For two earlier brief studies of McDougall’s public reception in the American period, see R. A. Jones, ‘Psychology, History, and the Press’, Carlos Alvarado & Nancy Zingrone, ‘William McDougall, Lamarckism, and psychical research’.


pointer to the spiritualists, remarking that if he had known any such message, he would rather ‘fill Symphony Hall and charge each of you five dollars for the privilege of hearing me speak’. 18

Already the following year, in spring 1923, the board of trustees of the society had grown displeased with their president’s confrontational style. Quite unexpectedly, they overthrew McDougall’s presidency and instated the reverend Frederick Edwards in his place. 19 The new leadership was directly opposed to McDougall’s scientific profile, and took steps to reverse his policies; Edwards’ first acts as president included seizing control of the ASPR’s publishing activities, and disbanding the Scientific Council that McDougall had just established. The following year saw the beginning of the Margery affair. As far as claims to scientific credibility are concerned, that affair would become the proverbial nail in the coffin for the ASPR, motivating the final schism of 1925. From that point onwards, the alternative Boston Society (BSPR), founded by Walter Franklin Prince, became the standard bearer of scientifically oriented psychical research in America. Over the years to come, Prince and the BSPR would spend much time polemising with the ASPR, and in particular with its pro-spiritualist research officer and previous editor of *Scientific American*, J. Malcolm Bird. 20 Apart from providing an alternative, pro-scientific voice, the BSPR did not accomplish much, however. It finally withered away with the illness and death of its founder in 1934 – a fate not uncommon among psychical research societies.

Parallel to the polemic between the spiritualistic ASPR and the science oriented BSPR, McDougall continued the campaign that he had begun during his short term as ASPR’s president. Seen as an act of double boundary-work, McDougall’s polemic was not only directed at the spiritualist sympathisers in the ASPR; he also attacked the established university disciplines. In particular, McDougall sought to penetrate the epistemic boundaries built around the university system, and claim a space for psychical research within it. This led him to open up fundamental questions concerning

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18 McDougall, ‘The Need for Psychical Reseach’, 51. If we measure by relative income value, which takes into account changes in GDP per capita, a commodity priced at five dollars in 1922 would be equal to a price of $351 in 2010. Figures are obtained through www.measuringworth.com (accessed March 23, 2012).


20 Cf. the discussion in chapter eight. See Prince, ‘A Review of the Margery Case’.
epistemology, particularly the concept of agnosticism as a scientific guiding principle, as seen in chapter seven, but it also led him to address the social and educational duties of a modern university.

To appreciate the space McDougall tried to claim for his version of psychical research, we must have a closer look at some of his lectures directed at audiences comprised of psychical researchers and spiritualists, on the one hand, and academics with a general interest in the field, on the other. Two lectures are particularly important in this respect: the 1922 Boston lecture, and his 1926 lecture at the conference “For and Against Psychical Research” held at Clark University. Proceeding chronologically, I will begin with an examination of the former. The Boston lecture was entitled ‘The Need for Psychical Research’, and was primarily addressed to those ‘intelligent people’ who were, for various reasons, indifferent to organised psychical research. McDougall proceeded to divide this audience into three groups: 21

1) The *deniers*: Those who flat out deny that there can be anything in it (‘opposed to or indifferent’). This category included people like Houdini and like-minded committed sceptics and debunkers.

2) The *agnostics*: Those who profess to have no specific conviction one way or the other, but do not see why they should invest their time in psychical research. McDougall held this to be the largest group, a “silent majority”.

3) The *convinced*: Those who have developed a personal conviction of the reality of certain psychical phenomena, and since lost interest or become directly hostile to the critical investigations of organised psychical research. McDougall obviously had the spiritualists in mind, and used Conan Doyle to metonymically denote the whole group.

These three groups represented major targets for McDougall’s campaign: the “deniers” were external Others, who had to be fought off and defended against, while the “convinced” spiritualists were internal Others, threatening the professionalism of the field from within by spreading unscientific attitudes and jeopardising the credibility of their more scientific companions. The “silent majority” did not pose a threat that needed

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to be countered, but if its indifference could be changed into enthusiasm it could become a powerful ally for psychical research. For now I will silently pass over the arguments designed to entice this group, and focus on McDougall’s showdown with his enemies.

How did McDougall try to convince his audience that committed sceptics and spiritualists were both wrong? Against the hard-nosed sceptics, he used arguments resonant with what is considered good scientific conduct. A true man of science, McDougall argued, is obliged to scrutinise all opinions held by sophisticated people, even popular opinions. This is especially important if such opinions go against commonly held scientific claims. If such claims are based on flawed reasoning, insufficient or erroneous data, superseded or disproved theories, then scientific men are obliged to refute them in public, and show the people why they are wrong. This was clearly an educational point: academics have the duty to fight ignorance, enlighten the people, and disseminate proper, quality-controlled knowledge. But there was also a point to be made about research practice: it is considered good scientific conduct to test one’s theories against the best available counter-evidence, indeed to systematically seek out such disconfirming evidence. McDougall was certainly not alone in holding that psychical research, if there was anything in it, challenged current scientific models in a broad range of fields, from physics to psychology. Finally, McDougall appealed to the “adventurous spirit” characteristic of cutting-edge research: great discoveries often come from the study of obscure and, as of yet, mysterious corners of nature. Even if some of the phenomena that psychical research concerned itself with would turn out to be explicable through completely “disenchanted” theory, they may still give us new and useful knowledge, whether in the sciences of life and mind, or in the physical sciences. In summary, McDougall attempted to negotiate the borders that had been drawn around the scientific enterprise by arguing that it is really in science’s own interest to take psychical phenomena seriously. Whether or not the phenomena will be found to be authentic was less important; the crucial thing was to not reject a whole field of research out of hand.

The attack on convinced spiritualists was perhaps the most important aspect of McDougall’s 1922 polemic. It can be seen as an exercise in internal boundary-work,

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22 Ibid., 52-54.
23 Ibid., 60-63.
aimed at exorcising elements in the field that were deemed to be a liability. The polemic McDougall launched aggravated pre-existing internal differences, and it was no doubt a factor leading to the ASPR’s organisational schism two years later. Looking at the actual arguments advanced, McDougall’s main problem with the spiritualists was their strong and apparently unshakable conviction, which appeared dogmatic and wholly counterproductive. This state of dogmatic conviction, he observed, had led many who had started out with an attitude of curiosity to develop a direct hostility to scientific psychical research, which they would now, in their newfound spiritualistic piety, regard as impudent. The internal threat posed by dogmatic spiritualists was in fact cast as the most serious obstacle to psychical research:

This attitude of impatient hostility on the part of such persons is one of the greatest difficulties in the path of psychical research. For experience shows us that, of all those who enter upon the path of psychical research, a considerable portion become lost to it, by passing over into this hostile camp. Having become personally convinced of the truth of the main tenets of spiritualism, these persons cease to be interested in research and devote themselves to propaganda. It is only too probable that many of those present in this room are inclining to follow this course, that they are hesitating between psychical research and spiritualist propaganda.24

If they were so strongly convinced of the authenticity of psychical phenomena, McDougall argued teasingly, then surely they should have nothing to lose by submitting their beliefs to critical inquiry. If their favourite mediums were indeed able to do what they said they could, then the only effect of scientific investigation would be to dispel doubt and gain legitimacy. Indeed, they too should have everything to win by sympathising with psychical research’s tireless pursuit of whatever evidence there is for spiritualist claims. Moreover, in an age when organised science had become very powerful and authoritative, it was only by getting it to acknowledge the reality of such phenomena that they could become fully, and legitimately, established as truth in society at large. Any way one looked at it, professional scientific recognition would be the only sensible way to go. However, McDougall cautioned: if the claims, properly investigated, turn out to be ill-founded, then the scientifically minded spiritualists would

24 Ibid., 60.
be committed to accept the verdict with eyes wide open, and help spread the message that there was nothing in it. From the scientific point of view, this would be a matter of intellectual honesty, pure and simple.

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The divisive Boston lecture was, in the end, a call for organised, scientific psychical research on a big scale with the aim of convincing a group that was getting ever more significant in modern society: the professional scientists. McDougall picked up on this track in his 1926 lecture at the conference “For and Against Psychical Research” at Clark University. The speech was directed at a university audience, and urged that psychical research be accepted as a proper university discipline. It included polemical, but on the whole reasonable, attacks on established scientific disciplines, intended to show that psychical research could be just as good at the shaky game of science as any other currently existing discipline. McDougall’s main strategy in the apologetic defence of his field was to propose three main areas in which a modern university is supposed to perform, continuing to show how a professionalised psychical research could either do just as well, or even outperform the established disciplines at these tasks. The three areas were education, the forming of public opinion, and research.

The function concerning education would be eminently fulfilled by the amount of critical methodological training that McDougall envisaged for a professionalised psychical research. Anticipating a fundamental accusation, he denied that a discipline of psychical research would be founded on a lack of critical sensibilities, leading to irrationalism. Quite to the contrary, McDougall argued that proper, scientific psychical research demands such amounts of critical thinking, reflection over presuppositions and limitations of observation, demonstration of knowledge, experimental control, etc., that it is especially well-suited as a university discipline. This would make it eminently suited to fulfil the function of “education”, teaching students scientific methodology and critical thinking skills that were becoming ever more important for a modern university. McDougall was in fact making a point that was much more valid than most critics of

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25 Ibid., 62-63.
26 Or exerting ’a controlling influence in the formation of public opinion on all vital matters’, as he put it. McDougall, ‘Psychical Research as a University Study’, 152.
27 Ibid., 150-151.
psychical research have been willing to concede, whether in the 1920s or later. As discussed at some length in the previous chapter, the experimental pursuit of psychical research has played a valuable role in the history of scientific methodology, particularly when it comes to experimental design and data analysis based on probability calculus.28 That the most enthusiastic proponents of the field chose to disregard the innovations is another matter; McDougall’s claim that a properly conducted discipline of psychical research could have provided excellent opportunity to educate students in intriguing questions of scientific method is hard to deny.

The second point, of exerting an influence on the formation of public opinion, was intimately linked to some of the arguments produced already in the 1922 Boston address: the university, as the truth institution par excellence in modern society, has a responsibility to provide the public with qualified information on any popular topic. Mediums, ghosts, clairvoyance, telepathy – the whole gamut of psychic phenomena – were clearly popular and controversial topics: people had an insatiable hunger for them, and seemed ready to believe in anyone who claimed to provide testimony from the other side. The university had clearly not taken its responsibility seriously in this matter; with no academic expertise, the people were thus left to believe any amateur telling secrets for a fee. Even if psychical research would come up with a negative verdict concerning the genuineness of such phenomena, a specialist department would be able to provide qualified opinions to the people, McDougall reasoned.29

This leaves the third and arguably most important function of a university: research. This part was more difficult to defend, since even McDougall was forced to admit that psychical research seemed completely barren if judged from the empirical and theoretical breakthroughs or practical applications it had produced after nigh on forty years of existence. He had no clear results to show for it, and instead steered the discussion toward more fundamental questions: epistemology, agnosticism, and the philosophy of science. McDougall started by defending against unremitting scientific sceptics with a standard version of the problem of induction: even if results have not been forthcoming so far, there is nothing a priori that prevents a possible breakthrough in the future. The white crow might still be out there. This argument was, perhaps, not too convincing after decades of relatively unsuccessful organised hunts for white crows,

28 Cf. Ian Hacking, 'Telepathy'.
29 McDougall, 'Psychical Research as a University Study', 160.
black swans, and frankly just about any odd bird one might have spotted. McDougall, however, followed this line of argumentation all the way, ending with a full-scale attack on the agnostic ideal of scientific inquiry. Even an assertion that no knowledge was possible was construed as an “inductive generalisation” for which there could be no real support. We already quoted from this part of McDougall’s lecture in chapter seven, in the context of psychical research’s discourse of anti-agnosticism. McDougall argued that the opposition to psychical research on what he claimed to be a priori grounds was nothing but a ‘narrow and dogmatic ignorance, that higher kind of ignorance which permits a man to lay down dogmatically the boundaries of our knowledge’. He furthermore added that such “dogmatic agnosticism” was ‘apt to masquerade as scientific humility, while in reality, it expresses an unscientific arrogance and philosophical incompetence’. Below its impeccable surface, “dogmatic agnosticism” is revealed as being a less scientific principle than a more open-ended, empiricist program of psychical research would be – a program that acknowledges the question of where to draw the boundary of possible knowledge to be itself an empirical question that cannot be settled by a priori arguments. Read this way, “dogmatic agnosticism” actually succumbs to a mild kind of supernaturalism, in that it holds some types of (claimed) phenomena to be beyond the pale of any empirical inquiry. The question of their existence would then be left to faith alone – a decidedly unscientific attitude.

We have previously seen how this line of argumentation belongs to a broader struggle to define the episteme of scientific naturalism. In this respect, McDougall stood in a longer tradition which goes back to the work of Frederic Myers, James Ward, and F. C. S. Schilller, and further to mid-Victorian attempts to open naturalism up to include spiritualism within the domain of the “natural”. Here, however, we should point out that this anti-agnosticism also functions as a strategy of boundary-work. There is something ironic about this, seeing that agnosticism had originally been formulated precisely in a context of boundary-work itself, but one in which Victorian naturalists had sought to emancipate science from theology and establish a proper scientific outlook on matters that were currently under the domain of religion. By asking these fundamental epistemic questions once again, McDougall was striking directly at the

30 Ibid., 154.
epistemic boundaries of the scientific enterprise, in a way that aimed to show psychical research to be not only a *legitimate* pursuit, but a highly relevant one, standing at the very core of the empirical sciences on the whole. In the picture that McDougall painted, psychical researchers became “more scientific” than their “dogmatically agnostic” opponents in established university disciplines, putting much stronger emphasis on critical empirical inquiry. If his views were to be adopted by university policymakers, psychical research would not only be included in curricula – it would become the queen of the empirical sciences.

2 REACTIONARY NETWORKS:

**HOW PSYCHICAL RESEARCH CAN SAVE WESTERN CIVILISATION (ACCORDING TO W. MCDOUGALL)**

Maintaining strict boundaries with competitors and excluding internal threats are necessary for a new discipline to obtain any degree of institutional stability. The strategies that we have seen McDougall deploy so far were all tending in this direction, helping to carve out a scientific identity for psychical research and positioning it in relation to other scientific disciplines. But in order to succeed at academic professionalisation, it is not enough simply to have a firm identity. Obviously, there will be an expectation of some “rational content” as well, some promising experimental results, some innovative methodology, an accumulation of knowledge, or a promise of useful technological applications. This part was psychical research’s most glaring weakness, as we have seen. Luckily, the success or failure of a scientific discipline is not only judged on its internal rationality or visible “progress”. Social and cultural factors also play a role. In fact, sociological analyses focusing on the “extra-scientific” activity of would-be scientists become particularly relevant in situations like this: how can the socio-cultural components of scientific activity conspire to make a disciplinary formation successful, despite the lack of a strong “rational core”? A potential answer to this question can be sought in the theory of “actor-networks”: if, as Bruno Latour has argued in the case of Louis Pasteur, the socio-cultural networks of “allies” used to support a discipline play a significant role in successfully establishing it, is it also possible that such actor-networks are *sufficient* and may successfully establish a
discipline even when a strong “rational core” is lacking?\textsuperscript{32} The case of psychical research may suggest precisely this.

Exploring this angle, we should trace the networks between psychical research and other discourses that McDougall was knitting together in the 1920s. Some of these discourses were scientific, some philosophical, some religious, and others yet political. Psychical research was crucially linked on all levels.

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McDougall was not afraid of defending controversial positions. For that reason alone, psychical research was quite unavoidably connected to several intriguing and at first sight surprising links once McDougall tried to synthesise his interests. As discussed in an earlier chapter, he was an important spokesperson for what I have termed "the reenchantment of life": he promoted the Lamarckian theory of evolution, neo-vitalism, dualism with regard to the mind/body problem, and argued strongly for the case that teleology is an irreducible feature of nature.\textsuperscript{33} He was a forceful conservative voice against mechanistic-materialism and behaviourism in American psychology, and defender of an irreducible dimension of meaning in nature. In addition to these interests, McDougall was also an ardent supporter of eugenics. This, we shall see, is quite significant, for eugenics was a powerful discourse bridging science and politics in the inter-war period. It was also a central part of McDougall’s public advocacy in his American period. Immediately after arriving in the United States, McDougall delivered a series of lectures that were soon published with the provocative title \textit{Is America Safe for Democracy?} (1921).\textsuperscript{34} Here, McDougall argued for the need of eugenic policies to improve the American genetic stock. In particular, he held that the United States was troubled by dwindling intelligence ratios, which furthermore constituted an urgent demographic problem and a threat to American democracy. Needless to say, denouncing the average American as too stupid to vote did not make him a very popular man. In fact, it cemented his reputation as an arrogant British aristocrat, and it was also

\textsuperscript{32} For Latour’s analysis of the case of Pasteur, see Latour, \textit{The Pasteurization of France}.

\textsuperscript{33} For the details of McDougall’s positions and arguments on these topics, the reader is referred to chapter five.

\textsuperscript{34} The U.K. title was \textit{National Welfare and National Decay}. 
in this context that he was dubbed a ‘Nietzschean reactionary’.\textsuperscript{35}

Nevertheless, McDougall’s network of heterodox scientific notions was far from marginal in 1920s America. Vitalism was on the rise, in part due to the publication and wide circulation of Henri Bergson’s work.\textsuperscript{36} The “modern synthesis” in evolutionary biology would only start to take shape about a decade later, leaving Lamarckism as a still viable, albeit minority option.\textsuperscript{37} Meanwhile, eugenics was also at its peak of popularity among psychologists, biologists, statisticians, and politicians two decades before the atrocities of World War II gave the word its current connotations of genocide and state terror.\textsuperscript{38} In fact, by 1940, 35 American states had passed laws allowing involuntary sterilisation, and it has been estimated that a minimum of 64,000 eugenic sterilisations took place in the country between 1907 and 1963.\textsuperscript{39} Advocating eugenic policies was, in other words, fully possible without losing academic credibility. If anything, it was a way to make one’s position more interesting to politicians and policy makers.

Keeping this in mind, it becomes less surprising that McDougall’s steps to ally psychical research with controversial discourses that with hindsight appear “tainted” would actually facilitate the eventual establishment of professional parapsychology. I shall argue that it was precisely by allying psychical research to ideas belonging to Lamarckism, vitalism, and eugenics that McDougall managed to argue its place and relevance within a broader space of contemporary scientific and philosophical discourse. In fact, I shall argue that he managed to mobilise a broad range of contrarian discourses, some belonging to the “re-enchantment of life”, others to politically conservative positions concerned with the corrosion of value in modern society and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} McDougall, \textit{Ethics and Some Modern World Problems}, viii.
\item \textsuperscript{36} The English edition of Bergson’s \textit{Creative Evolution} became available in 1911, and sparked much debate, as seen in previous chapters.
\item \textsuperscript{37} E.g. Julian Huxley, \textit{The Modern Synthesis}. See my discussion in chapter five for details. For an assessment of American neo-Lamarckism, see Edward Pfeiffer, ‘The Genesis of American neo-Lamarckism’. The Lamarckian position appears to have had a significant influence on some of the special fields in biology and psychology, including in early theories of child development, and in insect psychology. See e.g. D. Hoogland Noon, ‘The Evolution of Beasts and Babies’; C. Sleigh, ‘Brave New Worlds’.
\item \textsuperscript{38} For the character, extension, and influence of the American eugenics movement, see especially Kevles, \textit{In the Name of Eugenics}; G. E. Allen, ‘The Social and Economic Origins of Genetic Determinism’.
\item \textsuperscript{39} See Allen, ‘The Social and Economic Origins of Genetic Determinism’, 88.
\end{itemize}
with the degeneration of people living in it.

McDougall was striking out a path in the landscape of science and religion that was quite different from those we have seen emerging as full-blown “natural theologies”. In a very strict sense, “religion” per se was not that important for McDougall. Unlike many other leading figures in psychical research, McDougall conspicuously seems to have lacked the typical motivation to save the soul through science. Instead, he was able to implicate religion in arguments for the relevance and social importance of psychical research through a rather different route. Following in the footsteps of William James’ pragmatism, he considered religion to play a vital function in society, and it remained desirable to defend a minimum of religious belief for practical reasons. McDougall’s defence of religion was in a sense utilitarian, thus bypassing the “intellectual sacrifice”. The question was not about the veracity of religious doctrines, but about the consequences of religious beliefs. Those consequences were measured in demographic terms, and enforced with the logic of eugenics. Religion became an instrumentum regnum, and psychical research a science for social engineering of the religious type. To understand how this was thought to work, we must look closer at the connection between eugenics, religion, and Lamarckian evolutionary theory.

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In his 1922 support of scientific method in psychical research, McDougall had confessed that eugenics and psychical research were his two greatest “hobbies”:

I have two hobbies—psychical research and eugenics. So far as I know, I am the only person alive to-day who takes an active interest in both of these movements. To most of you perhaps these two lines of scientific study have seemed entirely distinct and perhaps even opposed in spirit... [F]or my mind at least, these are the two main lines of approach to the most vital issue that confronts our civilization—two lines whose convergence may in the end prevent the utter collapse which now threatens.41

The threat McDougall warned about was that of biological degeneration, a concern that had haunted many critics since the late nineteenth century, and especially

40 This stands in some contrast to the founding members of the SPR, as portrayed in e.g. Gauld, The Founders of Psychical Research; Turner, Between Science and Religion.

those advocating Lamarckian views on evolution. Lamarckian advocates of measures against degeneration feared the rise of a serious demographic imbalance that would threaten the future of civilisation, and ultimately humanity itself. The basic argument was that populations, if left to themselves, would tend to degenerate with the advent of high civilisation. First, this was because modern societies were more hospitable to various biological “misfits” than more primitive conditions had been. Darwinians might easily agree with this point, arguing that natural selection operates differently in modern societies than it had on the savannah. Lamarckians, however, could add that modern societies even created “degenerate” traits such as criminality, prostitution, and alcoholism, which they furthermore argued were passed on to the next generation through inheritance. The Lamarckian view, which gave much more causal power to “culture”, could argue that modern culture was, in and of itself, a catalyst for biological degeneration. Secondly, there was much concern with an imbalance in the birth rates of modern societies: statisticians were showing that the educated upper classes were consistently less fertile than the lower classes. Arguing for the heredity of acquired characteristics, Lamarckians would hold that the social problems associated with the expanding lower classes were inherited by the next generation. When this point was coupled with asymmetrical birth rates, the future of society started to look very grim: while the cultivated classes barely managed to reproduce themselves, the degenerates multiplied. In the longer run, civilisation was doomed to collapse under the weight of the degenerate masses.

Eugenics was the political answer to the threat posed by degeneration. By taking control of the pattern in which humans reproduced, one hoped to prevent degeneration and social collapse from happening by consciously steering the direction of evolution itself. Thus, eugenics policies would aim at increasing fertility among the higher classes, or suggest advantageous strategies of selective interbreeding between various demographic groups. Such policies, aimed at stimulating reproduction among desired

42 Olson, *Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 277-294; for an overview of the spectre of degeneration as it had haunted European intellectuals around the turn of the century, see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*.

43 For representative examples of the measures proposed and discussed in the period, see especially Paul Bowman Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson, *Applied Eugenics* (1918); Eden and Cedar Paul (eds.) *Population and Birth Control* (1917). For McDougall’s own suggestions, also along the lines mentioned
demographical groups, were sometimes labelled “positive” eugenics. More notorious, however, were the “negative” eugenic policies designed to stop the inheritance of unwanted traits, especially through the sterilisation of those parts of the population that were assumed to carry them.

This general overview of the connections between degeneration, Lamarckism, and eugenics more or less sums up McDougall’s own position. It is precisely in recognising the central role of the Lamarckian theory in these eugenic arguments that we find a first important entanglement of psychical research in his reasoning. Jean Baptiste de Lamarck’s model of evolution had posited not only the inheritance of acquired characteristics, but also the existence of an “inner striving”, or “motivational force” as the driving force of evolution; thus, in place of mechanism, Lamarckism demanded some sort of teleological model. The Lamarckian theory’s incompatibility with the mechanistic conception of life was simultaneously a strength and a weakness for the theory: it was a strength because it resonated with the intuitive notion that will, striving, and active choices of the individual are important, and, moreover, was hospitable to cultural and religious agendas that wanted to counter the disenchantment of life. In short: if the self-determined choices of the individual matter, then there is a moral dimension to the evolutionary process. In the “disenchanted” Darwinian view, no such dimension is needed. Thus there is a clear connection here to the discussions encountered in chapter five: teleology, meaning, will, and vitalism stand together with Lamarckism. Lamarckism, in turn, urges an active role for moral education, and provides a theoretical framework for understanding the supposed phenomenon of “degeneration”. How, then, could psychical research contribute to this nexus of arguments? According to McDougall, psychical research contributed by providing data that, if properly established, required some non-mechanical, vitalistic theory of mind and life. It promised to provide empirical support for what was otherwise a purely metaphysical doctrine (vitalism), and could thus support the principles of Lamarckian

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44 Especially as found in the essays of Is America Safe for Democracy?, but also in McDougall, The Group Mind; idem, Ethics and Some Modern World Problem; idem, World Chaos; idem, Religion and the Sciences of Life.
evolution on a strictly scientific rather than a speculative basis.

Psychical research was deeply implicated in the neo-vitalism movement at large. McDougall was, together with Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch, one of its central spokespersons internationally. All three of these champions of vitalism served as presidents of the SPR at various points. Moreover, we have already seen that a number of lesser known vitalistic theories were developed in the context of that society, including by Myers and Lodge. Indeed, psychical research acted as an incubator of neo-vitalist theories, and it is thus only natural that McDougall would use it as a link to connect psychical research indirectly to other programmes that could be built on a vitalistic psychology/biology.

At this point we begin to see a long chain of ideas emerging, linking the socio-political discourse on degeneration and eugenics to the metaphysical problem of relating minds to bodies. This is precisely where McDougall found a primary role for psychical research, for he held that the most significant and powerful arguments for non-mechanistic agency in nature were to be found precisely in the evidential support gathered in the study of telepathy and survival. Already in his 1911 book, *Body and Mind*, McDougall had cited the so-called “cross-correspondences” as an especially strong argument for the necessity of adopting an “animistic” position of one sort or another. As we saw in the previous chapter, this series of investigations were based on mediums who, apparently without any normal contact between themselves, purportedly communicated with the “same” spirit entities, revealing striking similarities when the messages received were compared to each other. If accepted as genuine, this evidence would prompt any investigator to choose between two explanations that seemed equally fantastic: the survival of personality after bodily death, or tremendous telepathic or clairvoyant abilities active over great distances. McDougall argued that whichever explanation was opted for, some kind of animism would be attractive: if personality really survived death, then it had to be distinct from the body and independent of ordinary mechanistic interactions; if extraordinary telepathic powers explained the data, they would equally suggest a mental reach independent of the physical body and its sensory apparatus. To draw the points together: Lamarckism

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45 See especially my discussion of vitalism in the context of “psychic enchantment” in chapter six.


and the associated socio-political issues of degeneration and eugenics could be supported *philosophically* by a version of animism, and *empirically* by the findings of psychical research (see figure 12).

Figure 12: Chain of discourses linking psychical research with eugenics. Unbroken arrows illustrate that direct links were forged between these levels. The result is an indirect linking of the most basic scientific level (psychical research) with the socio-political level (eugenics), illustrated by a dotted line.

But there was also a second and more direct way in which psychical research could help eugenics to counteract degeneration, according to McDougall. This route was closely connected with the question of religion and its perceived conflict with science. Ever since the 19th-century attacks on religion by scientific professionalisers, people had feared that a decline in religious sentiments under the growth of a materialistic philosophy would lead to a withering away of ethics. Indeed, the founders of the SPR had already considered psychical research a possible way to counter this trend by finding empirical evidence for the existence of the soul, thus countering materialist metaphysics and saving some minimum requirement for religious belief systems.48

48 See e.g. Turner, *Between Science and Religion.*
McDougall argued that psychical research was superior to both theology and philosophy when it came to counteracting materialism and mechanism, since it was truly scientific and empirical in character, and not merely speculative as the others.49

But the argument concerning religion and ethics did not stop there. Enforced with the logic of eugenics, it took yet another turn, through demographical anxieties and social policies. The real problem with scientific materialism was not some vague notion of a spiritual degradation. The problem was quite specific: a materialist might see no motivation to procreate. A number of assumptions were involved in this view: materialists, it was assumed, are not compelled to consider the “sanctity of human life” that had been integral to Christian civilisation, and thus they feel no moral obligation to keep multiplying. Motivated purely by self-interest, having children would seem to them quite irrational. McDougall saw this as part of the demographic problem leading to degeneration, because according to him, loss of faith and morals due to materialism was to be expected primarily among the highly educated strata of society. The result is a structural pattern in which the highly educated fail to pass on their desirable characteristics, and thus perpetuate a demographic imbalance that will eventually bring society down. Providing the intellectual elite with new reasons to procreate was thus paramount. This was precisely the reason why religion had to be made acceptable to intelligent people, so that they might have a moral obligation to procreate even if they did not see any direct personal benefit in the present life they were living. Psychical research could help doing exactly this. As McDougall saw it,

[u]nless psychical research ... can discover facts incompatible with materialism, materialism will continue to spread. No other power can stop it; revealed religion and metaphysical philosophy are equally helpless before the advancing tide.50

The negative demographic pattern could be broken by making materialism less attractive to the educated classes. But intelligent and educated modern people needed good arguments and preferably scientific reasons if they were to reject a doctrine or adopt a new one. This was psychical research’s mission, and the discipline was now presented as a possible saviour of Western civilisation amidst the impending twin

50 Ibid., 59.
dangers of a loss of religion and a degenerating society. As McDougall put it in 1927 with regard to the importance of eugenics: ‘western civilization declines and decays’—soon it will remain ‘for some non-Christian people to carry on the torch of civilization’.51 McDougall had thus linked the pursuit of psychical research to the future welfare of the state and its people, and indeed to the very survival of Western civilisation.52

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If these arguments may seem convoluted and full of strange assumptions, it has to be noted that the negative stereotype of the materialist/atheist as an egoistic or even anti-social loner without family or friends has indeed been a powerful one, and continues to be so today.53 Moreover, in linking the preservation of the “race” with the adoption of right religion, McDougall was merely following a standard pattern of argument in the wider eugenicist movement of the early 20th century. One of the standard works on eugenic policies in the United States in the period, Paul Bowman Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson’s *Applied Eugenics* (1918), included a chapter on ‘Eugenics and Religion’ that is illustrative of this trend. Similar to McDougall’s later argument, the authors theorised that the general evolutionary significance of religion might be precisely to cancel the “rational” conclusion that having children is not beneficent for the individual,

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51 McDougall, ‘An experiment for the testing of the hypothesis of Lamarck’, 304.
53 This was noted by sociologist Colin Campbell, who, in his book *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* set out to show how “irreligion” to the contrary has been a strong social force, with its movements, organisations, and communities, postulating positive stances on ethics and values that go against religious orthodoxy in the society they find themselves (e.g. ibid., 4-5). For stereotypes against atheists and other nonbelievers today, a recent broad survey showed that American attitudes to atheists were predominated by distrust: in fact, atheists were comparable with *rapists* in the degree of distrust articulated towards them by respondents. It should be added that the sort of distrust polled for here was “criminal untrustworthiness”, meaning the ascribed likelihood of the person to indulge in anti-social, criminal behaviour. This finding was no doubt linked with another deeply seated belief, still found to be prevalent in America today: the notion that belief in a God who watches over everyone is likely to lead to moral behaviour - and that disbelief in such a supernatural entity means the dissolution of morality into savage egoism. This was precisely the same stereotypes that informed the debate about religion, materialism, morality and eugenics in the 1920s. For the survey, see Will Gervais, Azim Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan, ‘Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust Is Central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice’.
and thus ensure the continuation of the species by enforcing and managing the instinct to reproduce. They even argued that it is ‘essential to racial welfare’ that the ‘national religion’ is of such a character as to promote an ethics that makes sophisticated people want to have children.\textsuperscript{54} This in fact amounted to a theory of religion, quite overlooked in later surveys of such theories, where the evolutionary function of religion was to provide incentives to procreate.

While a discourse linking religious morality to procreation was thus well established, McDougall was not the first to make links between eugenics and psychical research either. As is often the case in psychical research, Frederic Myers has historical precedence with a few scattered references to the ‘much-needed science’ of eugenics appearing in the two volumes of \textit{Human Personality}.\textsuperscript{56} Preoccupied as Myers was with “degenerates” and “protogenerates”, he argued that

> The main use of knowing in what ways the race tends to slip backwards [i.e. degenerate] is that we may know how to \textit{press it forward} instead. In short, it is a science of eugenics rather than of therapeutics which is the characteristic, the primary science for any living and modifiable race; and for our dawning practical science of eugenics experimental psychology is the indispensable theoretic precursor.\textsuperscript{57}

McDougall appears, however, to have been the first to attempt to \textit{demonstrate} the connection between eugenics and psychical research through argumentation. His insistence that the latter has a role to play as a “fundamental science” to support the wider framework of eugenics is a particularly novel feature, which is only dimly prefigured by the quotation from Myers above.\textsuperscript{58} By claiming to save some of the intellectual credentials of religion – indeed to make it possible for the ‘reasonable

\textsuperscript{54} Popenoe and Johnson, \textit{Applied Eugenics}, 401.

\textsuperscript{55} For an overview of some of the most influential theories of religion, see Daniel L. Pals, \textit{Eight Theories of Religion}.

\textsuperscript{56} Myers, \textit{Human Personality}, vol. 1, 235; vol. 2, 516, 543. Quotation on page 543.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., vol. 1, 235.

\textsuperscript{58} Another man sharing a dual interest in eugenics and psychical research was the English pragmatist philosopher F. C. S. Schiller, but he does not appear to have made the connection as systematically as did McDougall. McDougall does, however, mention him as the only other man who holds both interests (‘The Need for Psychical Research’, 58).
scientific man’ to accept religion without succumbing to the intellectual sacrifice – McDougall bridged the rhetoric of other pro-religion eugenicists on the one hand, and psychical researchers on the other. He created a line of argumentation that was uniquely his own. It was, however, also a position that proved persuasive to other people who were morally conservative, preoccupied with religion, anxious about national welfare, inclined towards national patriotism, and enthusiastic about scientific progress while sceptical of scientific materialism.

In 1927, McDougall was offered a position as head of the newly established psychology department at Duke University, headhunted by the university’s first president, William Preston Few. The young university in Durham, North Carolina, had a distinctly conservative profile, as opposed to the “progressive” establishment of the Atlantic north-east. It had grown out of Trinity College, an institution with strong Methodist traditions, and had turned into a university only in 1924 after receiving funds from the tobacco industrialist James Buchanan Duke. The university’s motto was ‘eruditio et religio’, and it was clear from the outset that education and religion were to go hand in hand at this southern university.59 At a time when academic psychology was appearing increasingly “atheistic” and secular, McDougall appeared as a good candidate to head an alternative psychology department that respected conservative core values. William Preston Few saw in the controversial Englishman a strong and clear voice against materialism and mechanistic philosophy, and particularly against American behaviourism. As is clear from the correspondence between Few and McDougall before the latter’s appointment, and from Few’s presentation of McDougall in the student newspaper at the time of his arrival, it was precisely these reasons that had made him a preferred candidate to lead the new psychology department at Duke.60 He had actively refused the mechanistic and behaviourist trend in psychology, and his growing concern for the upholding of religious values fitted perfectly with Few’s vision for the university. Few’s inaugural address when becoming president of what had then (in 1910) been

59 This is clear from the inaugural address given by Few on the beginning of his presidency of what was then still Trinity College. Few emphasised the role of religion and the importance of upholding and supporting it against modern threats. It is to be noted that Few was really the architect behind Duke university, and the Duke family would not have donated to the college had it not been for Few’s personal networking and lobbying. See Few, ‘The Inaugural Address’.

60 Cf. the discussion in Mauskopf & McVaugh, *Elusive Science*, 133-134.
Trinity College emphasised precisely these points: the respect of southern religious sentiments and the resistance to materialism were highlighted. The college was to become 'a leader for conservative progress'. With his curious combination of conservative values and a strongly scientific attitude, McDougall appears a fine specimen of a “conservative progressive” if ever there was one.

3 PROFESSIONALS AT LAST:
THE INAUGURATION OF THE RHINE ERA

Arriving at Duke university in the summer of 1927, William McDougall finally found himself in a position to develop policies and administer budgets. He was thus free to start research projects that were dear to his scientific, philosophical, and social persuasions. His first step was to hire staff members that held similar views on psychology as his own – most of whom were former students of his – in practice establishing a department that went against the behaviouristic stream. This led to the commencement of Lamarckian and parapsychological experiments, side by side in the psychology department. During his first year at Duke, McDougall started a little-known set of experiments with rats to test the Lamarckian hypothesis of evolution directly. The experiments ran for a total of seven years. As we saw briefly in chapter five, he even claimed to obtain significantly positive results, and received positive reviews in various scientific periodicals. It was also at this point that McDougall embraced Louisa (1891–1983) and Joseph Banks Rhine (1895–1980), an ambitious botanist couple who had developed an interest for psychical research after reading Bergson's *Creative Evolution* and joined the vitalistic insurgency against mechanistic materialism. Inspired by McDougall's repeated pleas for the institutionalisation of psychical research, the Rhines eagerly wanted to conduct such work in a university setting. Their cooperation with McDougall would lead to the foundation of the first autonomous research institute for parapsychology at an American university. Psychical research was about to transform

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61 Few, 'The Inaugural Address', 54.
64 See McDougall’s foreword to Rhine's *Extra-Sensory Perception* for some details about this history.
into modern professional parapsychology.

In this last section we shall look briefly at the formation of professional parapsychology at Duke, starting with the collaboration between McDougall and Rhine. This was where psychical research established its first real “paradigm”, which was adopted by other researchers working at institutions both in America and abroad. In this section, then, we will finally see the merging of the “internalist” history drawn up in the previous chapter, and the “externalist” considerations made in the present: Rhine’s eventual success in establishing parapsychology as a discipline depended on new rounds of networking and boundary-work, in addition to the development of an experimentalist programme that would satisfy the standards of rationality upheld by neighbouring fields.

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Rhine first arried at Duke with his wife Louisa in September 1927, in order to work part-time as an externally funded postdoctoral researcher in the philosophy department. The funding was given to systematise the records of mediumistic séances performed by the benefactor, John F. Thomas, and it was arranged that McDougall would supervise Rhine’s work for one semester. Meanwhile, Rhine took the opportunity to follow some of McDougall’s courses in psychology, thus slowly learning to know that field. More significantly yet, he was recruited to work as a lab assistant in McDougall’s Lamarckian experiments, thus giving Rhine indispensable training in this peculiarly interdisciplinary work in the borderlands of psychology, biology, and philosophy. On the side of these activities, Rhine conducted independent psychical research of a rather peculiar kind. Through the winter and spring of 1928 J. B. and Louisa were researching the mind-reading and future-predicting horse Lady, at a farm in Richmond. Psychologists had showed extensive interest in the cognitive abilities of animals prior to this event, with Oskar Pfungst’s experiments with “clever Hans”, a horse who was supposedly able to perform advanced arithmetic operations, as the most well-known example. Rhine's research with Lady, partially supervised by McDougall, followed this

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65 For details on this story, see Mauskopf and McVaugh, *Elusive Science*, 79-85.

66 See Pfungst, *Clever Hans* (1911; originally published in German in 1907). It should be noted that Pfungst’s experiments showed how the horse was not really doing any thinking, but that the horse instead
line of research into animal cognition, but investigated supernormal cognitive abilities rather than advanced normal ones. The investigations resulted in two reports published in the *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology* in 1929, one generally positive, the other negative.67

These were the first published results in psychical research produced in the collaboration between Rhine and McDougall, but it was far from the line of work for which Rhine would become famous and on which modern parapsychology, retrospectively, was to define itself. The tests of the psychic horse were a form of qualitative research that focused on a single individual; the interpretations and tests used were in fact explicitly influenced by the work of the Dutch psychologist Brugmans, mentioned briefly in the previous chapter.68

During the first year and a half at Duke, the Rhines spent much time reading systematically in the psychical research literature that McDougall had brought there. Significantly, Rhine used the command of the literature that he thus acquired to make a compressed judgment on the “state of research”, which would furthermore direct his own research design.69 Taking the work of Warcollier, Brugmans, and Estabrooks as particularly successful precursors, he concluded that supernormal cognition, whatever it was, had been shown to: a) be a wide-spread faculty that was yet stronger in some people than others; b) be dependent on states of relaxation, and prone to disappear with fatigue; and c) improve or decline under the influence of various drugs; again, drugs that induced relaxation were thought to be beneficial to psychic functioning. Furthermore, psychic phenomena such as telepathy were unlikely to be electromagnetic in origin, connected for example to extra-cranial neurological influence. In a more methodological reflection, Rhine was also brought to suggest, rather radically, that telepathy and clairvoyance needed to be lumped together as one single experimental object. This was a sound decision, since it was extremely hard to distinguish empirically and experimentally between the two hypothetical faculties. The observation would

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69 See e.g. Mauskopf and McVaugh, *Elusive Science*, 85.
become central to his own research, but it was also used to reinterpret various earlier studies that had been thought to be negative. For example, Rhine found that the control runs Coover had used against telepathy had been designed in such a way that they did not rule out clairvoyance. Thus, when no difference was found between these controls and the “telepathy” test, there still remained the possibility that both in fact had measured what Rhine called an “undifferentiated” extra-sensory perception.\textsuperscript{70} Rhine even suggested that these runs, when checked against a purely mathematical average instead of a control group, had been much more significant than Coover had himself admitted.\textsuperscript{71}

The bulk of Rhine’s own experimental work was carried out in the period 1930 to 1932. In the summer of 1930 he called upon the assistance of Karl Zener, a colleague in the psychology department and a specialist of perception, to design symbols for a completely new deck of cards.\textsuperscript{72} The symbols were designed in a way that was thought conducive to telepathic and clairvoyant perception, principally by being easy to visualise, memorise, and distinguish from one another. The five symbols that Zener came up with – a circle, cross, square, star, and waves – have since become trademarks of modern parapsychology (see figure 13). There were five of each type in a deck of 25 cards, thus making them much easier to use for standardised tests than ordinary playing cards had been. During the first year, Zener and Rhine carried out 800 trials with these new cards, a pilot project which seemed to yield mildly positive results.\textsuperscript{73} Among the subjects tested was the undergraduate student A. J. Linzmayer, who appeared to score significantly above chance in repeated tests. Focusing on “high-scorers” such as Linzmayer became another trademark of Rhine’s research, significantly bridging earlier experiments that had been based either on the assumption that supernormal faculties were evenly distributed, or that they depended on unique talent. Here, too, Rhine found reason to criticise Coover’s earlier results. He claimed that Coover had failed to recognise the significance of the fact that his most successful results had been achieved by a disproportionately small number of his test subjects –

\textsuperscript{70} Rhine,\textit{ Extra-Sensory Perception}, 25.

\textsuperscript{71} This was the case for more of Coover’s results, according to Rhine. Ibid., 21-22.

\textsuperscript{72} Cf. Mauskopf and McVaugh,\textit{ Elusive Science}, 89-90.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 90-91.
more precisely 8% of them, according to Rhine.\textsuperscript{74} Rhine’s own method was designed to pick out such presumably "natural" high-scorers.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{zener_cards}
\caption{The first two generations of Zener or ESP cards, as shown in Rhine’s popular book, \textit{New Frontiers of the Mind} (1937).}
\end{figure}

Research continued along these lines in 1932, with Rhine recording close to 40,000 Zener card guessings in total.\textsuperscript{75} At this point he was making use of graduate students in the psychology department not only as test subjects, but as research assistants. Together with one of these, J. G. Pratt, he came across another high-scorer, Hubert Pearce. Pratt would go on to be a leading voice in the new generation of professional parapsychology in his own right, whereas Pearce became the most successful high-scorer in Rhine’s study. After 2,250 trials, Pearce was recorded as having scored 9.6 hits per run of 25 (against a chance expectation of 5). Linzmayer, by contrast, had scored 7.5 per 25 after 2,649 trials – less impressive than Pearce, but still an apparently highly significant figure.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} Rhine, \textit{Extra-Sensory Perception}, 21-22.
\textsuperscript{75} Cf. Rhine, ‘Extra-Sensory Perception of the Clairvoyant Type’.
\textsuperscript{76} See ibid., 158.
These experiments became the empirical foundation for Rhine’s groundbreaking publication, *Extra-Sensory Perception*. The monograph was published in 1934 by the “pro-science” Boston Society for Psychical Research, with a short report published the same year in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. We have already mentioned two of the most significant features of these studies, namely the methodological innovation of employing the new Zener cards, and, of course, the positive results claimed to have been achieved with this new method. In addition to streamlining experimental procedures, Rhine was also concerned with developing a new scientific nomenclature. Earlier references to “telepathy” and “clairvoyance” were now replaced by the more general and unassuming “extra-sensory perception”, abbreviated as ESP. What is more, Rhine was concerned with making analytical distinctions between various *types* of extrasensory perception and creating scientific taxonomies. Thus, in his 1934 book he introduced a distinction between two main types: telepathy (ESP of other minds) and clairvoyance (ESP of physical objects). In addition to these “differentiated” types, Rhine worked with a category of “undifferentiated ESP” for experiments where clairvoyance and telepathy could not be clearly distinguished from each other. As we have seen, this was a significant move for experimental purposes, and for reinterpreting earlier work.

The inventory of technical terminology and experimental procedures was expanded further in the years that followed. Rhine had already mentioned the possibility of a *temporal* dimension to ESP in *Extra-Sensory Perception*. Further development of that idea gave rise to the concepts of *precognition* (ESP of the future) and *retrocognition* (ESP of the past). Although Rhine would later acknowledge that no reliable support for retrocognition had been forthcoming, precognition became one of his favourite effects: more than any other parapsychological effect, precognition seemed incompatible with the present physical worldview. It seemed to imply a complete break-down of causality as well as the arrow of time.

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80 Rhine, *Extra-Sensory Perception*, 14
In addition to the temporal expansion of ESP, experimentation was begun on the more spectacular \textit{physical} phenomena of psychical research, now re-invented as \textit{psychokinesis} (PK), or ‘the direct action of mind upon matter’. In a paradigmatic experiment, the “agent” would attempt to influence the rolling of dice. These experiments, too, seemed to yield positive results with a number of subjects, and Rhine encouraged his correspondents to take up similar research and replicate his results. More than with any of the extra-sensory effects, even those with a temporal dimension, PK research seemed to point without doubt in the direction that Rhine wanted to go: that mind was not ruled by mechanical law, but acted in a manner independent from the physical body.

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The results Rhine claimed to have obtained captivated both laymen and professional psychologists. A network of correspondents emerged following the publication of \textit{Extra-Sensory Perception}, including both professionals and amateurs interested in setting up experiments and attempting replication of the results. Taking advantage of the momentum, Rhine established the \textit{Journal of Parapsychology} (JP) in 1937. With its own specialist, peer-reviewed forum, the new discipline of parapsychology was to attain additional scientific recognition. The first issue was dedicated to publishing independent replications of Rhine’s findings, thereby seeking to consolidate the status that had already been built in 1934.

Seeking scientific recognition through a peer-reviewed journal has certain consequences. When the journal starts to publish reports of radical breakthroughs, colleagues will want to critically analyse the data, look for flaws, inconsistencies or experimental error, and seek alternative hypotheses. The establishment of \textit{JP} in 1937 indeed marks the beginning of a wave of critical responses to parapsychology, primarily coming from the discipline that it most sought to attach itself to: experimental psychology.

\footnotesize{82 Rhine and Pratt, \textit{Parapsychology}, 13.}
\footnotesize{83 Mauskopf and McVaugh, \textit{Elusive Science}, 170-171.}
\footnotesize{84 Cf. ibid., 173.}
\footnotesize{85 See ibid., 183-190.}
\footnotesize{86 For details, see ibid., 187.}
Several features of Rhine's published experiments made critics suspicious. Robert Thouless, himself both a psychical researcher and a psychologist, criticised Rhine for being imprecise in describing the procedures that had been followed and the controls used, a criticism that was quickly followed up by other psychologists. An even graver allegation was levelled by the second-generation behaviourist B. F. Skinner, who had made the acute observation that both the original homemade Zener cards and the commercially produced decks that appeared later, were designed in such a way that it was possible, under certain conditions, to see the symbol of a card from the back. This indicated a highly problematic source of error, especially when combined with the troubling lack of precision in Rhine's description of how the apparently successful early experiments had been conducted. It would seem that sensory cues could not be properly discounted, throwing all the results into doubt.

The possibility of such sensory cues becomes even more troubling when one considers that suddenly, in the summer of 1934, all of Rhine's high scorers seemed to simultaneously lose their powers. In an attempt to stimulate them to scoring well again, Rhine decided to relax the test conditions. Doing this, however, he personally caught his subjects cheating by making use of sensory cues. Rhine immediately kept this troubling piece of information to himself, apparently reasoning that the earlier experiments had been so much stricter that no such cheating would have been possible – even if the subjects would have wanted to.

Selection bias would later be brought forward as a possible source of error for many of Rhine's findings. There has for example been much concern with Rhine's

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87 For reviews, see Thouless, From Anecdote to Experiment, 76-77; cf. Mauskopf and McVaugh, Elusive Science, 191-2, 256-72.
88 Ibid., 260-263.
89 This story is related briefly by Mauskopf and McVaugh, Elusive Science, 175. Unfortunately, they do not provide accurate references for the event, which appears tremendously important for a full critical assessment of what went on at Duke during these crucial years.
90 The mathematician and sceptic Martin Gardner has for example suggested that the way Rhine selected his famous "high scorers" was a simple way of generating a seemingly positive, but entirely artificial result. The so-called "decline effect" that Rhine and other parapsychologists became interested in (namely that the significance seemed to gradually disappear in repeated runs, even with the best subjects) was furthermore seen as a reason for suspicion, the suggestion being that it could simply be special case of "regression to the mean". See Gardner, Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science, 302-8.
stated policy for the *Journal of Parapsychology* that ‘little can be learned from a report on an experiment that failed to find psi’.\(^91\) This policy suggests that the journal systematically avoided publishing negative results, leading to a systematic bias that may create the illusion of a strong evidential foundation where there was in reality much more room for doubt. This is particularly problematic with the failure to publish unsuccessful replication attempts.

In early criticisms of the “Duke school” of parapsychology there was also much concern with the statistics used by Rhine and his companions.\(^92\) One correspondent of Rhine’s, R. R. Willoughby, pointed out that some of the “astronomical odds” Rhine conjured up from his data were in fact so astronomical as to warrant *ipso facto* suspicion; if they had been calculated correctly, ESP would appear better established than the prediction that the sun will rise in the morning.\(^93\) Indeed, this is suspiciously reminiscent of the debate concerning improper uses of probability that raged in the SPR journal as early as the 1880s in response to Richet’s early work and C. S. Peirce’s fierce criticism of *Phantasms of the Living*.

In short, Rhine and his collaborators had a tough time maintaining their newly won professional recognition. To make matters worse, the Duke parapsychology laboratory lost its backing from the university in the mid-1930s, as McDougall stepped down as head of department and could no longer guarantee its place. These disappointments made alternative strategies necessary in order to maintain the legitimacy of the field. Most significant was a turn towards lay people and possible external sources of funding.\(^94\) Parapsychology was in the middle of a new growing phase of popular interest, and Rhine turned out to be a deft publiciser and fundraiser.

In fact, losing its influence over the university budget would prove less of a financial problem than a status problem: in 1935, yet another independently wealthy person with spiritualist leanings offered significant donations to make parapsychology

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\(^91\) “Psi” being a generalised term used to refer to all paranormal psychic effects, including all types of ESP and PK. Cited in R. S. Broughton, ‘Publication Policy and the *Journal of Parapsychology*’, 27.


independent of the psychology department’s budgets. This endowment put Rhine in an extremely advantageous position in comparison to his colleagues at Duke university. As Mauskopf and McVaugh have documented, the sum Rhine had at his disposal to fund parapsychological research, after all other expenses had been paid for, was almost four times as high as what the rest of the psychology department had for research put together! Indeed, Rhine’s money accounted for more than one tenth of the research funds of the entire university – and that included a well-funded faculty of medicine. By the end of the 1930s, parapsychology was not only established in a university setting, it had become a disproportionately well-funded discipline as well. While the university location was due in large part to the networking of McDougall, the discipline’s wealth was thanks to rich aunts and uncles with a desire for knowledge about life after death – convinced by a charming Rhine.

In addition to securing independent funding through private donations, popularisation and skilful handling of the media was another mark of Rhine’s activities to secure parapsychology in the late 1930s. Media coverage of the unusual research at Duke peaked around 1937/1938, when Rhine published his popularising account *New Frontiers of the Mind*. The book defended McDougall’s anti-mechanistic, vitalistic conception of the human mind based on new parapsychological evidence. It was successfully marketed, appearing as a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, and even given commercial radio attention by the Zenith Radio Corporation. For a whole year they broadcasted weekly ESP-“tests”, often featuring Rhine himself in the studio. Zener-cards were now commercially produced and sold – appearing with a J. B. Rhine copyright. Indeed, these years saw a rapid commercialisation of the paranormal, with Rhine appearing as part scientist, part prophet, and part salesman.

The massive media coverage brought parapsychology to everybody’s lips. Incidentally, this made it easier to raise funds as well. Over the years, contributions

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95 Mrs. Bolton, wife of an industrialist from Cleveland and friend of the famous English medium Eileen Garrett. It was Garrett who had put Rhine and Bolton in touch with each other. See Mauskopf and McVaugh, *Elusive Science*, 137.

96 See Mauskopf and McVaugh, *Elusive Science*, 139.

97 For this commercialisation process, see Mauskopf and McVaugh, *Elusive Science*, 160-163, 256.

from various rich uncles, usually requesting more research on post-mortem survival, piled up. It has been estimated that Rhine's later independent research lab, the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man, comfortably presided over two million dollars by 1968.99 These channels of funding, unconventional and with strings attached, nevertheless made parapsychology an easier target for its critics. Indeed, it is the source of the funds rather than the lack of funding that appears to be parapsychology's eternal problem.100

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Parapsychology and psychical research appear to have gone into hibernation during the Second World War.101 After the war, however, the struggles to keep parapsychology legitimate, coupled with continuous attempts to network it with popular interests in the “paranormal” as well as with various moral and political issues, continued as before. Against the new geopolitical and ideological threats of the emerging Cold War, Rhine was opportunistic enough to brand parapsychology as a defence of voluntarism, and the “correct” political view of American liberalism.102 Parapsychology was now sold to laymen, government, and would-be private financiers as a cure for America’s “spiritual ailments” and as a battle station against the impending dangers of materialism and communism. Parapsychology was even conscripted for military purposes, with the Star Gate programme, begun in 1972, as the most significant example.103 This government-

99 Allison, 'Experimental Parapsychology as a Rejected Science', 283. The economic power of these funds in 1968 is equal to 31.9 million dollars in today’s economy, according to measuringworth.com. Note that other methods of comparison are possible; economic power, which estimates the value based on the proportion of the total economy, seems most relevant for comparing the size of research budgets.

100 Cf. Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, 'The Construction of the Paranormal', 254-255.

101 In Germany, the hibernation started already with the Nazi takeover in 1933. This is dramatically exemplified in the correspondence between Rhine and Hans Bender. The correspondence started in 1936, and continued irregularly for a couple of years, until 1938. Then follows a hole until after the war, when, from 1947 onwards, Rhine continued the correspondence and contributed significantly with resources for the rebuilding of Bender’s research facilities in Freiburg. See the Rhine – Bender correspondence, IGPP-Archiv 10/5, A II 13.

102 Especially in his popularising work, New World of the Mind, published at the height of McCarthyism in 1953.

103 For an evaluation of Star Gate, see the official report by Mumford, Rose, and Goslin, An Evaluation of Remote Viewing Research and Applications.
funded research programme into applications of parapsychology for military intelligence was only disbanded as late as 1995, after the CIA assumed control and judged the project to have been a complete waste of tax money.104 Parallel to such successes and failures, parapsychologists have been forced to fight off an increasingly growing, self-aware, and well-organised group of sceptics and debunkers, standing in the tradition of people such as Peirce, Jastrow, Houdini, and Coover.105 In short, the fight for parapsychology’s status as an academic field was far from over at the end of the 1930s, but has continued through the entire 20th century and into the 21st. All of that, however, is a separate story.106

4 CONCLUSION:
ENCHANTMENT IN OLD DIXIE

Parapsychology managed to become a professionalised discipline due to sociocultural rather than strictly scientific reasons. The case of parapsychology, and particularly the development from McDougall’s campaign in the 1920s through Rhine’s activity at Duke, thus serves as a good illustration of the usefulness of a social study of scientific formations: an analysis focused strictly on “rational reconstructions” simply fail to find a satisfying explanation for the establishment of psychical research within a university context. While this is interesting in its own right, and an important vindication of the

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104 Ibid. Cf. the somewhat bitter reflection by Star Gate’s last director, Edwin May, ‘The American Institutes for Research Review of the Department of Defense’s Star Gate Program’.

105 Secondary literature on the so-called “skeptics’ movement” are surprisingly hard to come by, especially outside of the polemical literature either defending or detesting it. Some focused discussions are available in Olav Hammer, ‘New Age Religion and the Sceptics’; idem, ‘Contested Diviners’; Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Oh no, it isn’t”: Skeptics and the Rhetorical Use of Science in Religion’. For the relation between sceptics and parapsychologists in the post-war era, see David Hess, Science in the New Age. For an example of discussions biased in favour of parapsychology (by far the most common one as far as biased historical overviews go), see e.g. Chris Carter, Parapsychology and the Skeptics; cf. the sociological analysis by Jeremy Northcote, The Paranormal and the Politics of Truth, which is itself only a little less biased in this direction. The primary literature is too vast to quote in passing.

106 For my own take on the development, and particularly of parapsychologists’ struggles to keep legitimacy during this period, see Asprem, ‘Parapsychology’, 651-664. The most complete study, although taking a somewhat more cultural-anthropological approach, is Hess, Science in the New Age. See also Asprem, ‘Psychic Enchantments of the Educated Classes’.
usefulness of sociologically oriented studies of science, the precise nature of the networking aspect is of particular importance for us at present. The strategies wielded by McDougall to link psychical research to pivotal philosophical, social, and political issues demonstrate the centrality of the problem of disenchantment. The alliance with biological vitalism, purposive psychology, and epistemological anti-mechanism mobilises the entire spectrum of opposition to disenchantment. The only “usual suspect” missing is a reference to quantum mechanics. Connections between parapsychology and quantum mechanics did, however, appear in Germany, particularly in the work of physicist Pascual Jordan, who had contact with the German parapsychologist Hans Bender.¹⁰⁷ The collaboration between Wolfgang Pauli and Carl Gustav Jung is another case in point. In America in the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, it was simply too early for such a connection to be made, seeing that the broader popularisation of the Copenhagen school and the popular reception of quantum mechanics would only pick up speed after the War. From that point onwards, however, links between parapsychology and quantum mechanics have become abundant and indeed predictable.¹⁰⁸

Significantly, it was the mobilisation of anti-disenchantment discourses that in the end made it possible for parapsychology to emerge as a professional discipline. It was on the basis of this network of discourses that McDougall was headhunted by the president of Duke University. Furthermore, it was only after discovering Bergson’s vitalism that the Rhines discovered psychical research and followed McDougall’s pleas for a scientific and university-backed research programme. While it is often assumed that the modern academy has built its very identity on a “disenchanted” outlook, the professionalisation of parapsychology suggests that things may have been a little more

¹⁰⁷ Bender mentions having met with Jordan to exchange information on parapsychology in a letter to J. B. Rhine dated March 24, 1949. It is unclear if they were in touch also before the war, but we do know that Jordan explored the possible relation between quantum mechanics, vitalism, and parapsychology already in that period, publishing a paper on parapsychology in the Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie in 1936. Jordan, ‘Positivistische Bemerkungen über die parapsychologischen Erscheinungen’.

¹⁰⁸ I will not attempt to give any comprehensive list of references to this development in the post-war period, seeing as it falls outside of the scope of the present study. I will, however, note that the link appears to have grown particularly popular in the 1970s, with a whole conference dedicated to ‘Quantum Physics and Parapsychology’ in Switzerland in 1975. See Laura Oteri, ed., Quantum Physics and Parapsychology.
complicated. The explicit and forceful rejection of disenchanted values (sic!) may even have created some surprising strategic advantages. In this particular case, the advantage is no doubt tied to a broader context of national history and identity politics specific to the United States: Duke was a young university, and president Few was explicitly interested in building an identity that was specifically “southern”. The memory of the Civil War and a nostalgia for old Dixie forms a significant and evident subtext to Few’s academic policies, evident from his inaugural address. In this particular case, then, the identity of north and south is projected on an axis that coincides with disenchantment/enchantment. Thus, even if parapsychology would prove to be far removed from religious orthodoxy as conceived of by most southern Christian denominations at the time, it became an ally of the “southern” university by challenging the explicitly mechanistic materialism of “northern” behaviouristic psychology.

I have suggested that the relation to religion has remained important, although in a generally more utilitarian and instrumentalist way than what we have seen in, for example, the new natural theologies of the same period. McDougall’s defence of religion was justified by utilitarian concerns for the future of Western civilisation (and the white race) rather than a metaphysical interest in the existence of divinity, a longing for transcendence, the survival of the soul, or any such common agenda. In addition, there is the factor of a genuine curiosity coupled with a perhaps overly optimistic view of the reach of scientific knowledge. Rhine’s interest in religion followed these general lines, although the eugenic and Lamarckian interest of McDougall are not to be found in his later work. It is, however, notable that Rhine wrote a paper on ‘Experimental Religion’ in 1929, which, although he distributed it to a number of correspondents over the years, has remained unpublished. This paper is important, as it shows the preoccupation of bringing religion on to a new and solid foundation, raised on sound scientific methodology. Rhine attempted to solve a problem that had apparently haunted him since his college days, namely ‘that of finding a place for a spiritual element in a human

109 Flew, ‘The Inaugural Address’.

110 The manuscript is kept in the archives of Duke University. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to access these sources first-hand for the present study. See, however, Mauskopf and McVaugh, Elusive Science, 86-87, 328 n. 53.
nature increasingly comprehended by science’. As Mauskopf and McVaugh summarise:

The weakness of religion ... was that it rested on authority and inevitably collapsed before the modern spirit of investigation; consequently, to survive, religion would have to test its assumptions empirically in the spirit of modern science. This could scarcely be done by the bitter opponents or confirmed supporters of orthodox religion; nor by scientists professing religion, who would inevitably have compartmentalized the two subjects for good and all; nor by theologians who felt that science and religion must inevitably be in harmony .... Instead, it was open-minded scientists with no previous commitments who might hope to verify – or disprove – the claims of religion.

We can hear the echo of McDougall’s rhetoric as well as the concerns of the early pioneers of psychical research. Rhine even envisaged the creation of an ‘Institute for Experimental Religion’, that would apply strictly scientific methods to investigate “religious” claims such as the effects of prayer, the existence of ghosts and apparitions, and look for evidence of the soul in the workings of biological organisms. This brings Rhine closer to an explicit programme of natural theology, in the form of the school of psychic enchantment. Some of the later popularisations of parapsychology may indeed be seen to pick up this trend, and to do that with the important rhetorical power of being backed by an ostensibly scientific discipline, conducted and taught in universities.

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Following a line of enchanted science had, however, proved to be a risky endeavour, and parapsychology has never managed to become anything more than an ambiguous and controversial field at best. While I have focused on the specific advantages that were gained by attacking the problem of disenchantment in such a straight-forward way, there is little doubt that it also led to a fair share of problems. Even though the discipline

\[111\] Ibid., 86.

\[112\] Ibid., 86-87.

\[113\] Indeed, parapsychology seems to have created a persuasive and widespread framework for deinstitutionalised religion in the modern West, correlating with a high level of education. For an analysis of this phenomenon, see Asprem, ‘Psychic Enchantments of the Educated Classes’.
was, from a purely methodological perspective, always on a shaky foundation, it would seem that the very rejection of “disenchanted” modes of scientific theorising has become an *ipso facto* reason for sceptics to raise an eyebrow even *before* checking the evidence. In other words, sceptics might have found better reasons to reject parapsychology than the ones they were actually motivated by. This, finally, may be explained by returning to the two meanings of “paradigm”. Parapsychology established its professional status in a period where discussions about the broader “worldview” of modern science were unsettled. Furthermore, it succeeded by allying a paradigmatic constellation that has turned out to be rather short lived: vitalism and anti-mechanistic theorising had some academic power in the 1920s and 1930s, but has for the most part been obscured since the Second World War, especially, it seems, in the disciplines of psychology and biology. Parapsychology joined a losing team, and for this it has gotten into trouble. Since no “paradigmatic revolution” has occurred (although the prophets of such a revolution have been legion), it has been very easy to reject parapsychology since their data do not fit any meaningful conceptual or theoretical scheme. Ironically, perhaps, parapsychology is often rejected on similar extra-scientific grounds as those on which it was accepted in the first place.

Indeed, if we concentrate on the narrow sense of paradigm, we see that there was never much reason to accept parapsychology as part of the scientific fold in the first place. The evidence has always been flimsy, elusive, and uncertain, far from the kind of rock-solid certainties that have been driving major scientific revolutions in the past. While calls for a methodological reorientation have been plenty, no irrefutable regularities have emerged from the gestalt shifts. Thus, the apologists of parapsychology may be right that an “irrational” animosity based on paradigmatic “incommensurability” has been driving some of the resistance towards their field,¹¹⁴ but it is, nevertheless, the failure to produce a paradigm supportive of progressive normal science that constitutes parapsychology’s most fundamental problem.

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¹¹⁴ As suggested by sociologists Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, *Frames of Meaning*. 