

Beyond reason

Debbie Bodinger

Disenchantment with science and technology has turned people toward a belief in E.S.P. and other parapsychological phenomena, according to a York psychologist.

There is a general feeling that science has failed us, says James Alcock, a professor of psychology at Glendon, who has tried to understand the high proportion of people who believe in ESP or other aspects of the paranormal. Alcock spoke at York last Friday as part of the psychology winter colloquium series.

Alcock says that many people feel science has robbed them of their humanity and reduced them to mere automatons. This disenchantment with science and the decline of institutionalized religion have turned many people to non-western religions, fundamentalism, the occult and parapsychology.

As well, Alcock says, while science has cleared up many of nature's mysteries, it has simultaneously created mysteries of its own. Confronted by so many things beyond their understanding (eg. ovens that cook food in a matter of seconds), people cease to believe in their own reasoning as a method of deciding what is, or is not, likely to occur.

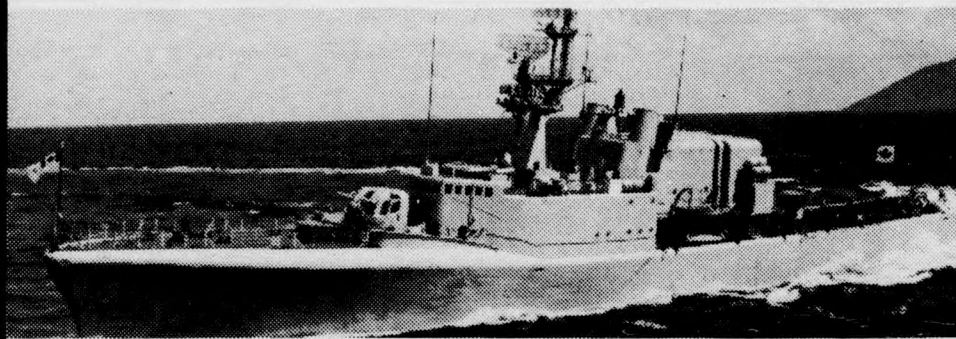
Alcock explained that many of us are brought up with two separate belief systems which we are able to switch between with relative ease. In school we were

taught logic, but at home or in church, we are taught that there is a class of experiences that should not be questioned, but be taken on faith. Because of this, many people will explain things as far as they can with logic, but when faced with a situation for which there is no obvious explanation, will switch to the other mode of thinking and label the experience as "mystical" or "beyond reason."

Not understanding the psychological principles behind many experiences, people are left without explanation and label them as paranormal. It is here, according to Alcock, that the science of psychology has failed, in that it has not educated the public as to what may be considered normal.

For example, most people are not aware that the brain will interpret two events spaced closely together in time as being related, whether or not they are. Nor do they realize that we tend to notice more often the times when two events occur together than the times when they don't. So, says Alcock, if one morning, after dreaming of death, you find that someone you know has died, you may interpret the dream as a premonition, forgetting the times you dreamt of death and there was none (or vice-versa). Experiments have shown that this tendency to infer causality under certain conditions is so strong that people are unable to overcome it, even when they consciously try.

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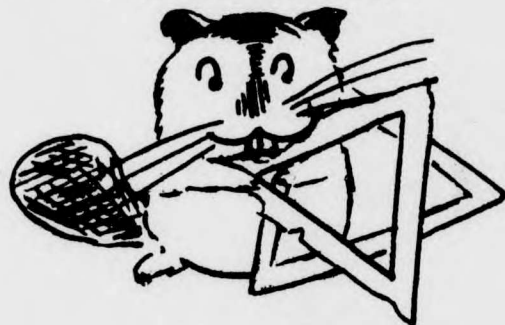
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