

BOOK REVIEW

Intended Audience: General

The Science of Spirit: Parapsychology, Enlightenment and Evolution

by Luis Portela

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Human society needs to evolve. Not technologically, nor in terms of lengthened life span or better bodies, but into an enhanced spiritual perspective on what matters, on how we are collectively intertwined, on how we need to serve one another, and on how we must enter into harmonious relations with our natural world.

This, essentially, is the argument put forth by Portuguese physician and entrepreneur Luis Portela in a series of gracefully-written essays that draws equally on religious wisdom traditions and scientific advances in parapsychology.

For those who labor in the somewhat rarified and still-ostracized field of parapsychology, much of the science he presents will be familiar. He touches on psychiatrist Ian Stevenson's meticulous research into children's reports of reincarnation; biologist Rupert Sheldrake's work on animal presentiment—their ability to be aware of future actions; healing at a distance; and the intriguing phenomenon of instrumental trans-

communication, in which the voices of deceased loved ones can be heard on radios, recording devices, and telephones. Portela does not toss all this at the reader without scientific circumspection. He is highly precise about what studies have found to date, and how reputable the researchers are. In the same way, he highlights near-death experience studies, mediumship, precognition, telekinesis and other modes of extra-sensory perception or action that mainstream scientists continue to largely ignore.

For readers unaware of these phenomena and the studies that support them, this aspect of his book would be eye-opening indeed.

Portela, who most certainly has an audience in Portugal, where he was awarded the Scientific Merit Medal in 2021 by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, urges his colleagues to stop disdaining parapsychology. “It falls to science to demystify some fantasies made up by shrewd exploiters of human ignorance,” he writes, referring to fortune tellers and TV psychics, “but it also falls to science to admit reality, whatever it may be, identifying all the potential energy in human beings, so that they may achieve better results while on this planet” (p. 94).

By this, he doesn’t mean the old Pentagon approach to parapsychology, funding studies in remote viewing and the like to see what advantage might be gained in war, or capitalists who are game to figure out whether there are untapped human potentials that will win them an edge over competitors in pursuit of profit.

Rather, Portela is interested in what an expanded awareness of mind, and of non-material mind, can do to bring us all closer to some degree of spiritual enlightenment. On telepathy experiments, for example, he writes that if we can be brought to understand, through science, that thought transference is real, then

we are transparent in our thoughts... By accepting that when thinking we are emitting radiations that might be perceived by humans and any spiritual beings, we will conclude that lying is, after all, only fooling ourselves. Reality is what it is, and others have ways of knowing it. (p. 98)

In other words, the findings in parapsychology bust us out of our individualized silos, and put to rest the delusion that we can con our way through life. We are rendered more vulnerable, more inescapably open. The capitalist trope of ‘faking it ‘til you make it’ no longer holds sway.

It’s an interesting take, and one that finds unexpected resonance in the counsel of the founder of the Bahai faith in the 19th century, known as the prophet Baha'u'llah. A Persian aristocrat who crossed the government and found himself in a dark Tehran dungeon, Bahauallah had a spiritual awakening, and eventually accrued many followers. Among his teachings (from his ultimate exile in Haifa) was that humans were in their spiritual adolescence. They needed to evolve, and for that to happen, there had to be a reconciliation between science and spirituality.

For Portela, because science is the dominant intellectual paradigm and arbiter of ‘truth’ in the 21st century, scientists must take the lead in reaching toward the great wisdom traditions, or perhaps, opening a new pathway to them and to what they tell us about a non-material, transcendent world. One way to do that is to stop being so reductive, and so resistant to human experiences that appear to defy the rules of a ‘clockwork universe.’ Can we have precognitive dreams and communicate telepathically? Well, many millions of people and dozens of cultures believe, on the basis of experience, that we can. So, it isn’t good enough for Western scientists to simply state, ‘it cannot be.’

In fact, as Portela points out, about one hundred scientists from a variety of disciplines penned an open letter to their colleagues in 2014, asking them to open their minds to the solid and methodologically sound research being done in the field of parapsychology.

“Perhaps an in-depth study of these phenomena,” Portela writes, “would allow for a greater degree of knowledge as well as a competent and responsible use of these abilities, facilitating a holistic and unifying perspective and thus a way of becoming more complete” (p. 47). In particular, if we come to understand ourselves as “a small particle of the universal whole while respecting the incredible degree of coherence and connectivity among all living beings or, even, between all the particles that exist in the universe, deeply and definitively interwoven” (p. 48).

About the Journal

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