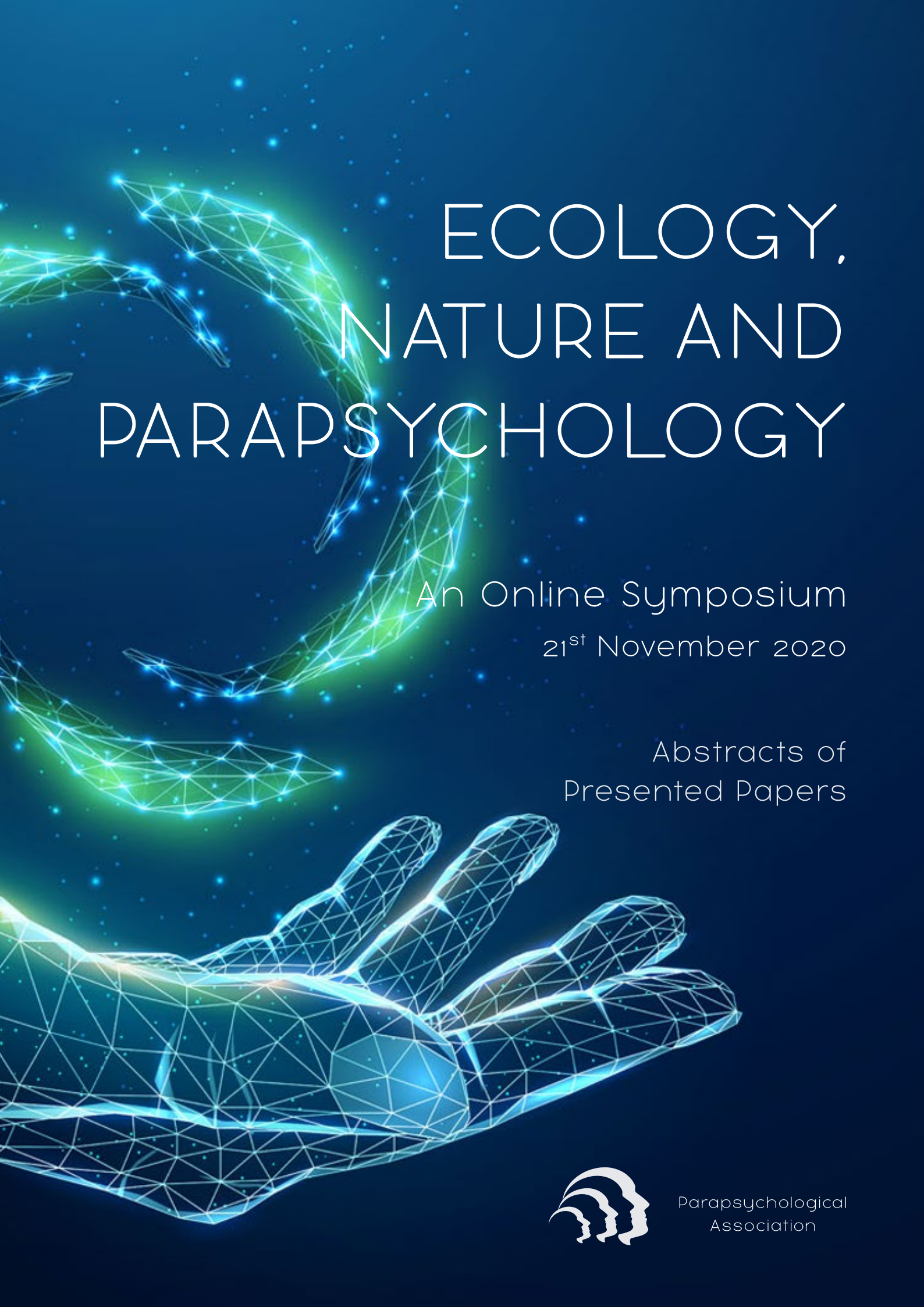




ECOLOGY, NATURE AND PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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Parapsychological
Association

ECOLOGY

PARAPSYCHOLOGY'S NEXT CHALLENGE

A recent collective book edited by anthropologist Jack Hunter, *Greening the Paranormal* (2019), developed some links between ecology and parapsychology. The field of ecology – defined as the study of the relationship between living organisms and their physical environment – is a relatively new area of scientific research. A major concept in ecology is the notion of ecosystems, which are all about relationships, a connection of everything through networks of reciprocal exchange.

The most obvious intersection between ecology and parapsychology is a commonly reported aftereffect of several different types of exceptional experiences (psychedelics, near-death or abduction experiences, etc.), that is the experiencer comes away from their encounter with an enhanced sense of connection to the environment and the world around

them (Ring & Elsassner-Valarino, 2006; Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017). The study of this rising “ecological consciousness” shows another promising aspect of these experiences.

Another intersection is the “naturalist” approach in psi research, what French metapsychics called the “ecology of the psi subject” (Méheust, 1999). Studying psi in its natural environment, particularly when it is recurrent, is best done in a way similar to a biological naturalist. Braude (2014) praised this proposed model of “psychic naturalism” for a better understanding of the nature of psychic functioning than controlled parapsychological laboratory experiments. Sheldrake (1999) used a lot of naturalist observations to develop ecologically valid experimental psi research with animals and humans.

Links between ecology and parapsychology were already made by several authors, with approaches like Long’s “extrasensory ecology” (1977), War-



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wick's "transpersonal ecology" (1990), Devereux's "re-visioning" of the Earth (1996), Schroll's "transpersonal ecosophy" (2016, 2018). We should also not forget that "vitalism" was a major topic for some older parapsychologists (Driesch, 1933; Geley, 1919). They saw a kind of spiritual 'vital force' behind some complex psi phenomena like ectoplasms (Normandin & Wolfe, 2013). The ethological observation of 'social animals' also inspired several parapsychologists, which favored a holistic view of mind, with telepathy as the missing link to understand zoopsychism, polyzoism and polypsychism (Mackenzie, 1923; Warcollier, 1946; Chauvin, 1985). They highlighted at each level – from cells to crowds – a "coalition for existence" in opposition to the Darwinian "struggle for existence."

More recently, the Global Consciousness Project was developed as a holistic experimental approach to psi, a unique 20-year scientific collaboration of researchers recording the effects of mass consciousness in response to major global events (Nelson, 2019). This suggests a large perspective similar to Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere and Lovelock's Gaïa hypotheses. Should we finally consider psi in its terrestrial ecosystem?

But, as suggested by Hunter (2019, p. 3), we should not examine parallels between ecology and parapsychology just for the sake of exploring interesting intersections, "but for the essential task of contributing towards a much broader – *necessary* – change of perspective concerning our relationship to the living planet." One way to discuss that is to analyze how "ontological assumptions underlying the rejection of the so-called paranormal by mainstream materialist science and culture are precisely the same as those that underlie the ecological crisis and our society's fractured relationship with the Earth" (Hunter, *idem*).

This is precisely what has been done by retired professor of philosophy Bertrand Méheust (b. 1947), a major French author in both areas of ufology and parapsychology, who has also published essays in political ecology since 2009. Méheust overtly establishes complex links between ecology, politics and anomalistics. All of his work over the past decade describes common properties of social groups welcoming charisms (including Jesus' so-called miracles), and especially their orientation toward a natural and cosmic solidarity. These groups usually face an

ecocidal organization of denial, which successfully manages to avoid overheating which would tip the system. Méheust relies on his expert knowledge on last century's institutional rejection of psychical research, especially the French metapsychics and its qualitative and "ecological" approach of psi experiences. However, he also applied to political ecology anomalistic theories, such as those on elusiveness and on the Trickster archetype. He suggested that one function of exceptional experiences is to "generate religions" that reorganize the links between man and its environment.

While humanity's greatest challenge is the current ecological crisis, parapsychology may contribute to the expected changes of behavior by changing the way we think about our place in the cosmos.

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The Ethical Implications ANIMISM Has for Parapsychology

Recent trends in science studies, anthropology, and aesthetics have returned to an understanding of the world that is grounded in the messy entwinement that interconnects beings of all kinds (cf. Stengers, 2010, 2011; McCormack & Gardner, 2018). This has been traditionally known as animism. Yet, what this 'new animism' postulates goes far beyond seeing the world through the lens of tribalism or indigeneity – perhaps a naïve anthropological understanding of how, let's say, the material world overlaps with the spirit world. This neoanimism, rather, brings into the fold of the world beings and phenomena that include the technological, the immaterial, and objects of analysis in the laboratory. My most recent book *Arts of Subjectivity* (Glazier, 2020) has applied this cosmology more globally. However, the specific bearing this new ani-

mism has on parapsychology is profoundly auspicious in that occurrences that have been typically labeled as paranormal are no longer not admissible *a priori* but instead are given the same substantive status, perhaps even more, than what physicalism has permitted.

There are three main lines of argumentation to be made regarding the implications this neoanimism has for parapsychology: (1) facts derived from the laboratory are created through a complex network of interactions that are then often not recognized by those doing the research, (2) this complex network is built on a heritage that is grounded in specific subjugating effects, and (3) moving away from privileging the laboratory can create a space for other methods at discovering truth that may be more ethical with regard, specifically, to ecology and subjectivity.

Take for example what Bruno Latour (2011) calls



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the experimental factish. While recognizing a sort of objectivity held by facts, those coming out of legendary science for example, Latour nonetheless argues that when compared to fetishes that contain so-called mystical powers, the modern scientist remains blind to the way the laboratory factish is also fabricated – blind in the sense of failing to see the sociological and anthropological influencing effects contained therein. By following Latour on this lead, parapsychologists could open-up a line of inquiry that would not only be critical of the way science has traditionally ostracized the discipline, on principled and theoretical grounds, but also more methodologically develop a new space for investigating the very ‘paranormality’ of psi itself; that is, why is psi considered paranormal in the first place, largely due, one could argue, to it challenging the way normal science operates. Michel Foucault (2018) likewise develops a more historically grounded critique in the way that institutional power, found in places like the laboratory, university, and other academic organs, has privileged a specific understanding of objectivity and truth. In this regard, the paradigm taken most for granted by mainstream scientists, to borrow a term used by Thomas Kuhn (1970), necessarily renders anomalous a phenomenon that parapsychologists have been calling psi.

Why, then, is parapsychology still trying to replicate the apparatuses and methodologies of physicalism and experimentation? Presumably to establish the reality of psi (Cardena, 2018), even though this ‘reality’ is continually challenged by skeptics and other scientists (Reber & Alcock, 2019). Invoking an alternative endeavor, perhaps, parapsychology might better be able to make sense out of paranormality through an animistic frame. This kind of animism is captured nicely by Donna Haraway (2016) when she denotes a new epoch in which to understand our world called the chthulucene. In contrast to the anthropocene, which has denoted the Earth changing effects that humanity has had on the planet, Haraway envisions a world where we must decenter the human as the arbiter of change and knowledge and pay close scholarly attention to figures and creatures that come out of myth, subaltern cultures, and minor narratives. This is a different

kind of scientific ethic that establishes a relationship between the researcher and an object of inquiry that embrangles them both in creating knowledge, truth, and objectivity. Such a shift could conceivably admit psi into its fold of worldhood thereby calling on parapsychologists to develop new tools and methodologies for exploring this uncharted terrain.

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Parapsychology and the ECOLOGICAL SELF

Deep Ecologists have long argued that the ecological crisis is simultaneously a psychological and spiritual crisis, and that if we want to change our environmentally destructive behaviors, we will need to re-conceptualize our relationship to the world in which we live. They have argued that there is an urgent need in the Western world to develop a new sense of self that sees the environment as an extension - or part - of the person - an 'ecological self' (Naess, 1995). Similarly, anthropologists have noted broad distinctions between what might be called 'individual' and 'dividual' models of the self in different cultural contexts, which are broadly (though not exclusively) normalized in Western and Non-Western societies respectively (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The Western Individual self is conceived as bounded by the physical body, distinct from the rest of the environment, and as a relatively stable and consistent stream of consciousness. Dividual models, by contrast, see the self as consisting of multiple interconnected parts (an ecology), which is dynamic and may include elements that exist beyond the confines of our physical bodies (spirits, other persons, or features of the natural world). Parapsychologists - from Frederic Myers (cf. Hunter, 2020) at the dawn of the discipline to Christine Simmonds-Moore (2019) today - have also argued that altered and liminal

states of consciousness appear to be psi conducive. It has also been noted that all manner of paranormal and extraordinary experiences seem to have the capacity to shake up our ordinary sense of self, often leading to an increased sense of connection to nature (Hunter, 2019). This paper will argue that parapsychologists might have been investigating the ecological self all along, and that psi phenomena might represent the connecting principles that make these dividual forms of selfhood possible. Understood from this perspective, parapsychology may have an important role to play in addressing the ecological crisis.

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Dr. Jack Hunter is an anthropologist exploring the borderlands of consciousness, religion, ecology and the paranormal. He founded the journal *Paranthropology*. His doctoral research with the University of Bristol examined the experiences of spirit mediums and their influence on the development of self-concepts and models of consciousness, and is an effort towards a non-reductive anthropology of the paranormal.

PSI, PSYCHEDELICS, NATURE

The use of psychedelics by indigenous peoples the world over for shamanic purposes has likely continued for thousands of years and is still widely practiced today. Classically, shamanism involves intentionally going into an altered state of consciousness to communicate with the spirits of nature and transcend time and space and bring back useful information for one's community. The practice of psychedelically inducing psi is therefore embedded within a nature-

based eco-spiritual epistemology and is difficult to disentangle as a web of interconnected relations, much like the mycelia connecting trees and the magic mushrooms that grow from them. This talk will explore the shamanic use of psychedelics in relation to psi and the biophilocentric effects of psychedelic use.



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THE MISSING LINK:

What Psi Tells us about Biology and Evolution

Psi phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, pre- and retrocognition call for a model of space and time that goes beyond the traditional model of spacetime. Many parapsychologists are in agreement that the world we perceive represents only an excerpt of a larger structure of reality, or background reality, that is inaccessible to our senses and technical measurement instruments. Hence, explanatory models of life and its evolution must take the existence of this background reality into account. Few parapsychologists or biologists, however, have so far attempted to connect unsolved riddles of biological life and its evolution to the findings of parapsychology. Hence, I will elaborate what psi can teach us about these topics, beginning with a short historical overview.

Although usually forming a minority in the psi com-

munity, there have always been biologists interested in psi. Especially in the first half of the 19th century, several biologists contributed to advancing parapsychology as well as biology in developing detailed neo-vitalist concepts of life. They soon resulted in the formulation of related approaches such as holism and organicism. Nevertheless, these older theories seem largely neglected in the present discussions linking psi to nature or life, which lack a comparable depth and richness of detail. To improve current discussions about the link between psi and biology, these historical concepts need to be taken into account, thus recognizing, revitalizing, and strengthening this tradition of thought.

Moreover, modern developments in parapsychol-



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ogy and biology have expanded the possibilities for a better understanding of life. Regarding parapsychology, a potentially important step consists in accepting additional modes of causality in nature such as Hans Driesch's "wholeness causality", or C.G. Jung's concept of "synchronicity", and in pondering the nature-philosophical models resulting from them. Jung mentioned possible areas of biology in which synchronistic events might come into play only in passing, but they are nevertheless significant. A deeper look into possible ramifications of synchronistic events or processes in organisms and their interaction with the environment offers fascinating perspectives.

These perspectives match trends in biology in which the basic understanding of organisms is currently shifting from regarding them as mere biochemical machines to regarding them as active and systemic centers of individuality, and even as active drivers of evolution. In particular, epigenetics provides important new insights into heredity, and a growing number of biologists recognize that the traditional neo-Darwinian model of evolution is insufficient. For example, the significance of natural selection has been diminished in new theories such as the "Extended Synthesis", in which it is accepted that many traits of organisms have not been carved out via random mutations and merciless selection of the best adapted in the course of evolution. Some traits could simply have come into existence because of autonomous development dynamics and may have no selective value.

Linking these seemingly divergent lines of reason, I argue that the acceptance of psi phenomena, as well as that of the background reality they are rooted in, provide a missing link that allows for the synthesis overcoming the still existing explanatory gaps in (evolutionary) biology in understanding life, although there are promising steps of development into the right direction. But the "Extended Synthesis" needs to be extended even more by including psi. In doing so, I follow a long tradition of thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, Hans Driesch, C.G. Jung, Aloys Wenzl, or Sir Alister Hardy. It is time to lift their approach to understanding life on a contemporary level.
