

Editorial

Bigelow, BIAL, and the Funding of Parapsychological Research

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Passion and commitment should be found in all “real” scientists, i. e. in those representatives who do not see scientific activity as just one of many professional and career options to choose between. For “real” scientists, the interest in knowledge and insight comes first and is not subordinated to the pursuit of career, fame, and other realities of the “science game.”¹ Such “careerists” will hardly be found in parapsychology or other fields of anomalistics, because whoever does research in these areas must have a high degree of idealism and resilience. Experience has shown that researching anomalistics topics does not make a career in the scientific mainstream. In the history of parapsychology there are many examples of endangered and even destroyed careers of scientists whose inquisitiveness was directed to such “unseemly” topics (Pilkington, 2013; Pilkington & Krippner, 1987). Accordingly, the well-known narrative becomes understandable, according to which, for example, a professor shortly before his retirement begins to openly admit his interests, which had been kept hidden until then, and to conduct parapsychological research more or less at his own expense.

All this is well known and so is the related problem of funding parapsychological research and research on anomalistics, which in many of its core issues can be classified as basic research. In most cases, the link to practical applicability is missing. Even in recognized scientific fields, greater efforts are required to obtain research funding for basic research. It becomes much more difficult when the accusation of pseudoscience is added and attempts are made to delegitimize or completely prevent any funding because this research is seen as a waste of human and economic resources. Consider, for example, the anti-scientific concept of “scientability” introduced by German science journalist and skeptic Christian Weymayr (2013) for the purpose of regulating the content of research funding according to ideological criteria;² or the remarkable commentary written by skeptics Arthur Reber and James Alcock (2020) in response to Etzel Cardeña’s

1 On the changes in the science scene and how scientists see themselves, see, for example, Henry Bauer’s (2017) *Science is not what you think: How it has changed, why we can’t trust it, how it can be fixed*. My review of this book appeared in the *JSE* issue 32(2) (Mayer, 2018).

2 See the reply by Harald Walach (2014).

(2018) review article on the evidence of parapsychological research published in the *American Psychologist* (AP). They wrote: „Claims made by parapsychologists cannot be true. The effects reported can have no ontological status; the data have no existential value“ (Reber & Alcock, 2020: 391). The fact that the two authors had left the field of science with their statement in view of the indisputable evidence of the findings of parapsychological research and could thus ultimately render parapsychology a service (Nahm, 2020), changes little in connection with the problem of research funding, at least in the short and probably also in the medium term. For the mere fact that this ideologically driven anti-scientific text was printed as a reply in a renowned peer-reviewed scientific journal such as the AP – incidentally without Cardeña having been given the opportunity to write his own reply (Cardeña, 2019) – shows the willingness of the scientific mainstream to deny parapsychological research its very right to exist.

This makes research funding through conventional funding agencies almost impossible, even if in individual cases it may be possible to undermine the funding barriers by a clever project description and concealing the thrust of the project. Accordingly, parapsychological research is often conducted in the form of hidden side or leisure projects – often self-funded – by people with a high idealistic component. There are also a few institutions such as the *Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health* (IGPP) in Freiburg, the *Institute of Noetic Sciences* (IONS) in Petaluma, California, and the *Koestler Parapsychology Unit* (KPU) at the University of Edinburgh that are equipped to facilitate long-term professional research in this area. In cases like these institutions one encounters key individuals with a special interest in the specific topics and with financial means to initiate and maintain such facilities. On a small scale, members of associations such as the *Gesellschaft für Anomalistik* [Society for Anomalistics], the *Parapsychological Association*, the *Society for Scientific Exploration*, and the *Society for Psychical Research* also provide support for such research through their membership dues and association involvement. Finally, there are few examples of parapsychological research being integrated into an academic framework, often only temporarily because it is strongly tied to individuals. The aforementioned KPU is one example. Others are the *Parapsychology Laboratory* founded by J.B. Rhine and the *Abteilung für Psychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie* [Department for Psychology and Frontier Areas of Psychology] established by Hans Bender at the University of Freiburg (cf. Lux, 2016) – both no longer exist. The American parapsychologist Robert Morris (1942–2004), the first Koestler Chair holder at KPU, who unfortunately passed away much too early, enabled the implementation of parapsychological research in psychology departments at British universities such as the University of Northampton (Chris Roe) and the University of Greenwich (David Luke), through a clever strategy of training young academics, which still continues. In Brazil, two psychologists, Wellington Zangari and Fatima Machado, succeeded in placing parapsychological research under the name of “Anomalistic Psychology” in the psychology department of the University of São Paulo, and the psychiatrist

Alexander Moreira de Almeida has established the NUPES, the Research Center for Spirituality and Health, at the University of Juiz de Fora. These examples are to highlight that it takes a special personal charisma and sometimes some camouflage to accommodate parapsychology in an academic setting.

It is self-evident that under these economic and scientific-political conditions the extent of research in this field is inconspicuous compared to other research fields worldwide.³ Accordingly, foundations and individuals are important as sponsors: Fanny Moser (1872–1953) and Asta Holler (1904–1989) for the IGPP, Edgar Mitchell (1930–2016) for the IONS, Arthur Koestler (1905–1983) for the KPU; for the general long-lasting support of parapsychological projects, the Eileen Garrett Foundation (which is now struggling with difficulties,) and the Perrott-Warrick Fund are to be mentioned as examples.

The physicist and inventor of the modern photocopying process, Chester Carlson (1906–1968), was significant for the formation of a special subfield of anomalistics, reincarnation research, producing its present shape and importance through his support. His financial support enabled the psychiatrist Ian Stevenson (1918–2007) to study professionally and for many years so-called CORT cases, “cases of reincarnation type”. These fascinating case investigations present – at least in the most convincing cases – an extraordinary challenge to those who seek to explain the phenomena conventionally. For some researchers, they even offer the most plausible evidence for a survival of the soul after bodily death (Nahm, 2021).

Personal paranormal experiences, encounters with people with extraordinary abilities and, above all, confrontations with their own death and the loss of loved ones gave many founders the impetus to provide funds for research in these fields. The desire for proof of an “afterlife” forms the driving force behind survival research. For the funders, this does not have to be about overcoming their own doubts; proof can also be sought for the purpose of convincing others.

This was apparently the case when American multimillionaire Robert T. Bigelow founded the *Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies* (BICS) in June 2020 with the goal „to support research into both the survival of human consciousness after physical death and, based on data from such studies, the nature of the afterlife” (<https://bigelowinstitute.org/about.php>). As a first step, at the beginning of this year he announced an essay contest on the question “*What is the Best Available Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death?*”

3 The Dutch parapsychologist Sybo Schouten overestimated the „research-years“ of parapsychology. He compared them with research in psychology, limiting himself to the American population. The roughly estimated 5,000 research-years, to which parapsychological research comes during the first 100 years of its existence, were raised by the American psychologists active in the research in less than two months of the year 1983 (Schouten, 1993: 316).

for which he offered the incredible prize sum of \$1.5 million. The first prize was \$500,000, the second \$300,00, the third \$150,000, followed by eleven other prizes of \$50,000 each. When the prizes were announced, he surprised everyone with 15 “consolation prizes” of \$20,000 each for “Honorable Mention Essays.” With the bombshell of the announcement of the gigantic prize sum, he generated a great response in the public media. Indeed the *New York Times* reported on it.⁴ It was noted with astonishment that there were more than 1,200 people interested in survival research who had been working on this topic for at least five years, a criterium for participation. About 200 of the applicants, who wanted to take part in the shower of prizes, were then admitted to the actual competition after a pre-selection process. The award committee was formed (presumably) by six “internationally recognized experts,” including a religious scholar, a journalist, a neurophysiologist, a psychiatrist who also offers regression therapy, a statistician, and a physicist.⁵

Looking at the list of award winners and taking a look at the texts,⁶ questions naturally arise as to why one contribution is placed here, the other there, and whether scientific criteria were in fact the deciding factor in all cases. The authors were given the task to present “proof beyond reasonable doubt” for a survival of consciousness after death.⁷ However, what is to be understood by “proof beyond reasonable doubt” is a matter of widely differing opinions. The RFP states, “BICS will accept evidence and eyewitness testimony supporting the legal requirement that establishes proof beyond a reasonable doubt”, and elsewhere, “BICS understands that true (or veridical) evidence includes a combination of a wide variety of forms; scientific, experiential, witnessed, repeatable, anecdotal and otherwise persuasive far beyond rules of traditional evidence-based hypothesis tested research paradigms” (see fn. 6). This leaves much room for interpretation, which was also used in the texts and by the jurors. Whether this did science any favors remains to be seen – especially if one knows the long history of survival research since the founding of the SPR (Braude, 2003).

But that may not have been the main goal of the contest at all. Considering the composition of the jury and the awarded texts, such an assumption is supported. This also applies to some

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/style/robert-bigelow-UFOs-life-after-death.html>

5 The call for papers mentions five international experts. The BICS website lists six experts (https://bigelowinstitute.org/contest_winners3.php). In a podcast by *Mystery Wire* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WkuXSTNG5g>), however, Bigelow mentions a female judge who, as a pastor, has accompanied more than 2,000 dying people at their deathbeds and who cannot be associated with the six people presented on the website.

6 https://bigelowinstitute.org/contest_winners3.php

7 The call for papers can be viewed via the wayback machine of archive.org: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210126013910/http://www.bigelowinstitute.org/>

statements that Bigelow made in the aforementioned podcast for *Mystery Wire*. When asked by interviewer George Knapp what the next steps of BICS will be, Bigelow replied that the winning essays will be compiled as an elaborate multi-volume book edition. These collected works will be given away to 3,000 to 4,000 recipients: “That could be churches, that could be hospices, that could be universities” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WkuXSTNG5g>). The chosen order of institutions, as they spontaneously came to Bigelow’s mind during the interview, could be understood as a telling indication of the project’s goal. A religious background cannot be overlooked. Even if Bigelow can be said to have a genuine interest in promoting science (“universities don’t give you grants to study this really important topic” – *ibid.*), this is inextricably linked to a religious interest. It also fits that a prominent religious scholar was a member of the jury (and possibly a pastor, whom Bigelow mentioned in the interview, but who is not named on the list of jurors presented on the website).

From the scientific side – and here we mean neither skeptics nor mainstream scientists, but interested “insiders” – critical voices were heard quickly after the announcement of the winners. This was to be expected, especially considering the number of winners and the amount of prize money distributed. Each of the people awarded a prize should be granted the rain of money. Bigelow’s generosity is also not to be criticized (“it is also, you want people to feel special” – *ibid.*). Nevertheless, a somewhat stale feeling remains. Prestigious prizes in other fields, whose prize sums rarely exceed \$20,000, are awarded at regular intervals, e. g. annually, to an outstanding person, group of people or institution. It is therefore clear that a great many other excellent candidates go away empty-handed each time, which always implies that there are many other deserving people in the respective field. This structure is undermined by the BICS Contest with the total of 29 prize winners and “consolation prizes” amounting to grand prizes in most other contests. The question arises whether another form of science funding would not be more appropriate, a form such as that found at the *BIAL Foundation*.

The *BIAL Foundation* was founded in 1994 by the Portuguese pharmaceutical company BIAL with the aim of promoting scientific research in the field of medicine, but also in parapsychology (<https://www.bial.com/de/bial-stiftung/>). From the very beginning, scientific experts were employed to ensure the quality of the funded projects. Currently, the *BIAL Foundation* is probably the most important source of continuous third-party funding for parapsychological research worldwide. According to information on its website, projects funded in this area between 1994 and 2020 have resulted in a total of 1,555 articles in scientific journals. This is particularly sustainable and lasting funding, which one can only hope will continue for a long time.

Bigelow has announced that for him, the essay contest is not the end of promoting research on the survival hypothesis. That is gratifying. The next possible project he envisions is the establishment of a think tank that could be formed from some of the contest participants. This is a

very good idea, although, the composition of the think tank would play a crucial role. Perhaps it helps to develop a corresponding awareness of the problem that allegations have since been made against one of the essays that won an award from the BICS jury. The CORT case described there is mainly based on the information provided by the child's father, which has evidently been documented in a questionable manner and presented very selectively in order to be able to present a beautiful and consistent "story".⁸ Even though, with more than 200 essays, each up to 25,000 words long, that had to be dealt with, the jury cannot be blamed for not having become suspicious when assessing this already very well-known case, this new revelation shows how important it is to have an experienced and critical cast of such panels and groups.

Concealed scientific work that is bad or even fraudulent has always existed and will probably always exist. Fortunately, there are also regular exposures of such abuses (see my editorial in the last issue [Mayer, 2021b]). In the precarious situation of parapsychological and anomalistics research, this is especially important. We hope that Bigelow will be open to appropriate suggestions as his science funding efforts continue. Scientific expertise in the field of parapsychological or anomalistics research should be the central criterion in the formation of an interdisciplinary think tank, because money and good will are not enough to bring about real scientific progress.⁹

Editorial:

Bigelow, BIAL und die Förderung parapsychologischer Forschung

Leidenschaft und Engagement sollten bei allen „echten“ Wissenschaftlern¹⁰ zu finden sein, also bei solchen Vertretern, die in der wissenschaftlichen Tätigkeit nicht nur eine von vielen Berufs- und Karrieremöglichkeiten sehen, zwischen denen es sich zu entscheiden gilt. Bei „echten“ Wissenschaftlerinnen steht das Erkenntnisinteresse an erster Stelle und ist nicht dem Streben nach Karriere, Ruhm und anderen Gegebenheiten des „Wissenschaftsspiels“ untergeordnet.¹¹ Solche „Karrieristinnen“ wird man in der Parapsychologie oder anderen Themenfeldern

8 <http://michaelsudduth.com/blog/>; entry from November 20, 2021: „Crash and Burn: James Leiniger Story Debunked“.

9 In a way, I felt reminded of the project *The Astrology File* (Sachs, 1999) of the German millionaire Gunter Sachs (1932–2011), who, although a scientific layman, had the idea to try to prove astrology with a large statistical study financed by him. Although he spared no financial expense and hired professional statisticians for the significance calculations, he ultimately failed because the statisticians had not understood crucial concepts of astrology (<https://www.astrology-and-science.com/S-crit1.htm> [Mayer, 2021a]).

10 Aus Gründen der Lesbarkeit werden die männliche und weibliche Form alternierend verwendet.

11 Zu den Veränderungen in der Wissenschaftsszene und dem Selbstverständnis der Wissenschaftler siehe z. B. Henry (Bauer, 2017) *Science is not what you think: How it has changed, why we can't trust it, how it can be fixed*. Meine Rezension dieses Buches ist in der *ZfA*-Ausgabe 17(3) erschienen (Mayer, 2017).