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COVER: Jupiter's moon Io, just discovered to be the only other apparently volcanically active body yet known in the solar system besides the earth, passes in front of the giant planet's turbulent Great Red Spot in this photo taken by the Voyager I spacecraft. See p. 164. (Photo: NASA/JPL)

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MARCH 17, 1979

LETTERS

A close encounter at birth

Joel Greenberg's article, "Close Encounters: All in the Mind?" (SN: 2/17/79, p. 106) reported striking similarities among three types of experiences (UFO encounters, drug hallucinations, and near-death). Persons under hypnosis who were known to have never had one of the experiences themselves were, nevertheless, able to relate "visions and happenings almost identical to those detailed by their 'real' counterparts." Several popular books which have recently documented the near-death experience of subjects from various countries around the world also emphasize the similarities.

It was suggested that "some sort of common matrix in the mind" may be responsible for each of the phenomena. Professor Lawson is quoted as saying, "The nature of the stimulus here is a very spooky thing." I would like to suggest that an application of Occam's Razor, wherein the simplest explanation is often the best explanation, is appropriate in this instance. The explanation I propose is that under hypnosis, the trauma of a near-death, drug-induced hallucinations, or a UFO encounter, the deep imprint of the birth sequence is replayed in vivid detail by the human mind. With only a little imagination, one can equate the events of the common sequence described in Greenberg's article with the events of birth.

One should be able to test this hypothesis by analyzing the existing case history files of individuals reporting one of these experiences. Several of the possible stratifications which could be made include natural vs. cesarean birth, born with vs. born without sight, and born with vs. born without hearing. I would be interested in any further thoughts your readers might have along these lines.

*Charles P. Arnold, Jr, Ph.D.
Papillion, Neb.*

Amusing implications

Your story on Helmut Schmidt's report to the American Physical Society on psychokinesis (SN: 2/10/79, p. 83) is very interesting, but its implications are also amusing.

I remember when psychologists (my own field) sneered at the possibility of any unknown mind force. Now they explain knowledge gained by clairvoyance or out-of-body experience as "just telepathy." They also used to call out-of-body experience "dissociation phenomena" until one of their own experienced it and declared that, whatever it was, it definitely was not "dissociation."

What has always been curious to me with regard to the fields of parapsychology/biology/physics/medicine is the different set of rules often applied to the experimental game by detractors. Any phenomenon requires that necessary conditions be present for experimental results. No physicist, for example, would expect a

match to light in the absence of oxygen.

In the mind sciences experimenters simply don't always know what the necessary circumstances are, but they seem to include such factors as the subconscious, emotion, and a positive (or at least neutral) mindset for positive results. As your article pointed out, negative mindsets can produce statistically significant negative results. I have heard physical theorists question whether mind *can* be excluded from an experiment, and certainly parapsychological research would seem to support that position.

J. B. Rhine has undertaken psychokinesis experiments far more recently than 1943. We are indebted to him for much of the tedious spadework in statistically demonstrating telepathy, precognition, retrocognition, and psychokinesis.

One of the fascinations of present-day science watching is observing the various sciences converge on what appears to be a coherent world view both ancient in tradition and mind-boggling in demonstration.

*Carolyn Amundson
Washington, D.C.*

Population density and eye contact

Reference is made to the commentary on the Goffman rule (SN: 1/6/79, p. 9). Goffman, it seems, postulated that people passing each other on the street will look each other in the eye from a distance but avert their gaze as they pass. Your report indicated that an attempt by Professor Cary to test this rule failed to confirm it. I've been a keen observer of people's eye movement for many years and would like to pass on this postulate, which agrees in part with Cary's speculation about the difference between his finding and Goffman's. What I have found over the years is that the greater the population density, the greater the tendency not to establish eye contact. Thus, when one walks down the streets of Manhattan or Paris, it's almost impossible to gain eye contact with other pedestrians. In small towns or in university campuses, it's the simplest thing in the world. In Manhattan if you say "Good morning" to a stranger, he thinks you're up to no good. If you say "Good morning" or just nod at someone in our tiny town, you'll be sure to get a nod and a smile back again. I became aware of all of this back in the middle 40's when the late Edwin S. Burdell, at that time president of The Cooper Union, where I was a student, pointed out the fact that the human can encompass only so many social contacts. In the city these social contacts come too fast and furiously and, as a result, people tend, rather than to embrace, to repel others. He used this to explain, for example, why people can live next door to each other in apartments that are much closer than suburban homes without ever getting to know each other's first names. Considering that he was making such statements thirty years ago, when the population density was not nearly what it is today, one wonders what the extrapolation will lead to.

*B. J. Luberoff
Summit, N.J.*

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