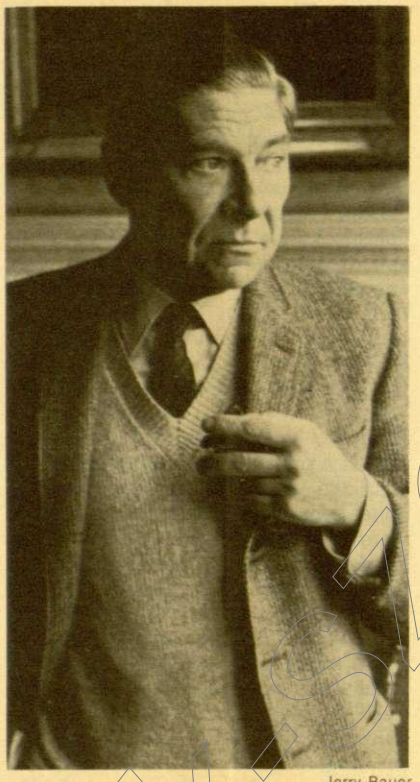
Arthur Koestler: Neoplatonism Rides Again



Jerry Bauer

Koestler: Pantheistic, Whiteheadian faith

THE ROOTS OF COINCIDENCE
by Arthur Koestler
Random House, 159 pp., $5.95

Reviewed by Martin Gardner

The curious thing about Arthur Koestler is that he believes in God. Not the transcendent, personalized deity of Moses and Jesus, but a deity more like the abstract God of Alfred North Whitehead. His faith is a kind of Neoplatonic pantheism. Behind the fragmented shadow universe, there is a vast, unthinkable Oneness, with laws so subtle that science has not yet formulated them, yet laws that are partly within the reach of science. In his final, most striking metaphor, Koestler speaks of scientists as "Peeping Toms at the keyhole of eternity." If they will only take the "stuffing"—their dogmatic prejudice against psychic research—out of the keyhole, they can touch off an intellectual revolution that will transform the world.

It is important to understand these metaphysical impulses behind Koestler's growing preoccupation with parapsychology. In all ages, religious believers have tried to bolster faith with material evidence. Saint Thomas Aquinas would not have been canonized had the Church not been convinced that one day he had floated in the air while praying. Today, when Christian miracles have dwindled to faith healing and glossolalia, Western theists who seek for signs (to use the condemnatory phrase of Jesus) are finding them in parapsychology. They are not trivial signs. If minds can influence the fall of dice, the growth of plants, and the healing of lesions in mice; if telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition are genuine phenomena, then Koestler is right. Joseph Banks Rhine, if not the prophet of a religious awakening, is at the least the Copernicus of a new rotation point in the history of science.

No one writing today is a more skillful polemicist than Koestler. His earlier books persuaded countless readers, including me, that things were far from what we thought they were in Stalin's Russia. For this I am grateful. How will he fare with his new, more positive rhetoric? In the light of current enthusiasm for astrology and the occult, I suspect he will fare extremely well.

The Roots of Coincidence is a small book of five brisk, colorful chapters. The first, "The ABC of ESP," sketches some recent work in the field and suggests that in both the Russian and U.S. space programs telepathy will have "important strategic uses as a method of direct communication." Chapter 2, "The Perversity of Physics," argues that recent theories about space, time, and matter are so wild that the hypotheses of parapsychology pale by comparison. The third chapter, "Seriality and Synchronicity," outlines an approach toward coincidence, which I will return to in a moment.

Chapter 4, "Janus," introduces Koestler's concept of the "holon." Nature is a "multileveled, hierarchially organized" system of sub-wholes, nested together like Chinese boxes. Each part, or holon, is to a degree autonomous, yet subservient to higher holons. A cell in your heart is a thing in its own right, but dependent on the heart, in turn dependent on you, in turn dependent on your family, and so upward through the holons of city, state, nation, and humanity until one reaches the Atman, the great world-soul of Hindu philosophy. Like Janus, each holon has two faces: that of the "proud, self-assertive whole" and that of a "humble integrated part."

"The Country of the Blind," Koestler's final chapter, applies the title of H. G. Wells's greatest short story to the earth itself. Unseeing scientists continue to concentrate on the physical world, unaware of the powerful gusts of new knowledge blowing through the cracks pried open by a few courageous psychic researchers.

Readers with little knowledge of contemporary psychology, and how its experiments are designed, are likely to fall under the spell of Koestler's persuasive prose and finish the book without any inkling of its many shortcomings. The most glaring is his failure to give us the slightest information about painstaking research, underway for decades, which runs counter to the claims of leading parapsychologists. He is annoyed by the suggestion that early researchers made unconscious recording errors, but he does not cite a single paper reporting tests of PK (psychokinesis) made by skeptical psychologists. During these tests a secret camera, recording each toss of the dice, revealed only chance results in contrast to a marked psi effect on the scoring pads of believing assistants. Koestler is even more scornful of the charge of fraud. C. E. M. Hansel, whose book *ESP: A Scientific Evaluation* (1966) documents a strong case for the prevalence of ESP cheating, is called the "most bellicose" among hostile scientists, and his valuable book is waved aside as a "last-ditch stand."

Contemporary research in parapsychology exhibits no evidence of increasing rigor except in the keyhole-stuffed laboratories of the skeptics, where results are monotonously negative. The most recent big splash in the world of psi was made by Jule Eisenbud, a psychoanalyst at the University of Colorado, with his preposterous book *The World of Ted Serios* (1967). Serios, a Chicago bellhop,

Martin Gardner is editor of the Mathematical Games department of the Scientific American, *and author of* The Ambidextrous Universe.

had a truly delightful talent. He would glance at, say, a photograph in *National Geographic*. Years later, after he had forgotten about the picture, someone could aim a Polaroid camera at him, snap a picture (using a wink-light and with the lens set at infinity), and ten seconds later, lo, there on the print would be a photograph, line for line like the one in *National Geographic*!

When *Life* wrote up Ted Serios for its September 22, 1967, issue, the article's author withheld one crucial bit of information. Nowhere did he disclose that, before a picture was taken, Ted always held a small one-inch-wide paper tube (which he called his "gismo") in front of the camera lens, presumably to focus psi-radiation from his skull. Photographers David B. Eisendrath and Charles Reynolds, both also amateur magicians, had no difficulty constructing a simple optical device which, secretly loaded into a gismo and later palmed out, could produce all the photographs in Eisenbud's book. The device is nothing more than a tiny cylinder with a positive transparency of a photograph at one end and a lens at the other. Light bouncing off the shirt and face of whoever holds the loaded gismo in front of the Polaroid camera is strong enough to produce excellent images on the film. Since their sensational exposé in *Popular Photography*, October 1967, Ted has softly and happily vanished from the psi scene.

LET me give another instance of the "rigor" of modern parapsychology. Perhaps the most respected of recent work is that being done by Stanley Krippner and Montague Ullman in the Dream Laboratory at the Maimonides Medical Center in Manhattan. (See their book, *Dream Studies and Telepathy*, 1970.) Koestler plugs their findings on pages 37-38, and Renée Haynes, in her postscript to *The Roots of Coincidence*, also praises the book on pages 146-147.

How trustworthy is Krippner? To answer indirectly, let us now turn to "Parapsychology in the U.S.S.R.", a magazine article by Krippner and his assistant. On the first page is a photograph of Ninel Kulagina, identified as a "noted Russian sensitive," causing a "plastic sphere" to float in the air. (The sphere is a mere Ping-Pong ball, light enough to be levitated by a variety of techniques known to magicians.) According to the authors, "a heightened biological luminescence seems to radiate from her eyes while she is performing."

KRIPPNER well knows that Mrs. Kulagina is a pretty, plump, dark-eyed little charlatan who took the stage name of Ninel because it is Lenin spelled backward. She is no more a sensitive than Kreskin, and like that amiable American television humbug, she is pure show biz. In 1964 when there was great excitement in Russia over ladies who could read *Pravda* with their fingertips, Ninel became the country's second most publicized finger reader. Alas, Soviet establishment psychologists caught her cheating, using techniques familiar to all magicians, and familiar even to Dr. Rhine, who took a dim view of the practice. (See my paper on "Dermo-optical Perception" in *Science*, Vol. 51, 1966, pages 654-657.)

On May 21, 1968, in a story from Moscow, *The New York Times* reported that Ninel—now using the pseudonym of Nelya Mikhailova—had been caught again. She was found employing concealed magnets to fool "Soviet scientists and newsmen into thinking she possessed the ability to move objects by staring at them." (Magnets are only part of the tale, but one hesitates to give away trade secrets.) Four years earlier, the same report revealed, Ninel had received a four-year prison sentence.

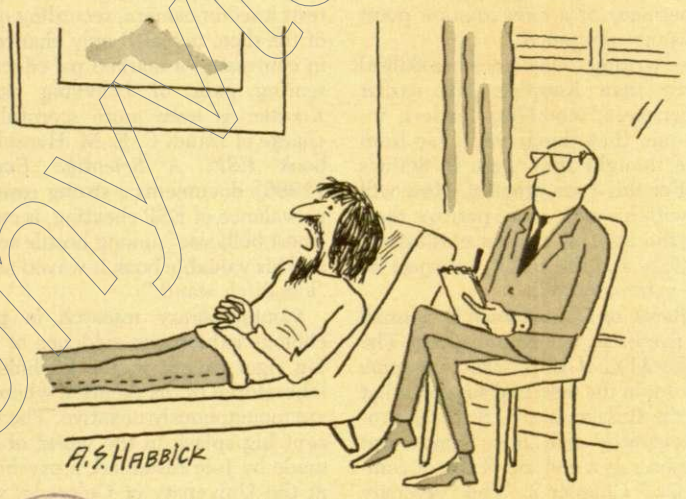
According to Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, in their book *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* (1970), Ninel's crime had been black marketeering. The late Leonid L. Vasiliev, the Soviet's top parapsychologist (Koestler praises his work) had intervened on her behalf, so she went to a hospital instead of a jail. Vasiliev had personally tested her and pronounced her talents genuine.

Vasiliev spent his last years working on finger vision. The "star subject" of this field, as Krippner refers to her, is Rosa Kuleshova. She is a skilled performer of card tricks who likes to "show them to every comer"; so writes G. Bashkirova in a favorable article on her, reprinted in the *International Journal of Parapsychology*, Autumn 1965. Bashkirova admits that Rosa often cheats, apparently just for the hell of it. In one demonstration she correctly guessed the color of objects by *sitting* on them. "Of course," Bashkirova adds, "she peeped." (He doesn't say with what.)

UNFORTUNATELY, Krippner didn't get to see Rosa either. She had, he writes in his above-mentioned article, gone off and joined a circus. Krippner did not tell his readers what he surely knows—that *The New York Times* on October 11, 1970, disclosed that Rosa, too, had been caught cheating by Soviet scientists (no doubt scientists with keyholes as tightly stuffed as those who had so cleverly trapped Ninel). Koestler is filled with respect for the Soviet Union's pioneering work in parapsychology. It is hard to understand how, having read the hogwash in Ostrander's book, he could imagine that any of the Russian work deserved to be taken seriously.

But the oddest aspect of Koestler's book is his argument that "meaningful coincidences" (they provide the book's title) may have "a-causal" explanations beyond the known laws of physics and mathematics. He spends many pages quoting from an untranslated study of coincidences written by Paul Kammerer, the Austrian biologist who was such a passionate defender of Lamarckism, and about whose work Koestler has recently written a sympathetic book, *The Case of the Midwife Toad*.

KAMMERER, it seems, spent enormous amounts of time keeping records of meaningful coincidences and trying to account for them on nonchance grounds. For example, he records a day in 1910 when his brother-in-law went to a concert, sat in seat 9, and was given a cloakroom check numbered 9. The next day the same fellow went to another concert where he had seat 21 and check 21. Kammerer



"All of a sudden, like, I discovered I was in love with the Establishment, Wow."

call this a "second-order series" because it repeated the previous coincidence.

Everyone has such experiences, and there is a simple explanation. The number of events in which you participate for a month, or even a week, is so huge that the probability of noticing a startling correlation is quite high, especially if you keep a sharp lookout. For the same reason a numerologist, with a large supply of words and numbers to play with, can turn up incredible correlations. Assume that the alphabet is a closed circle, Z joined to A. Shift each letter in OZ backward one step and you get N.Y., the abbreviation of the home state of L. Frank Baum, who originated the *Oz* series. For a second-order coincidence, shift each letter of OZ forward one step. You get Pa., the abbreviation of the home state of Ruth Plumly Thompson, who continued the *Oz* series after Baum's death. Numerical and alphabetical coincidences of this sort have been taken with utmost seriousness by countless groups, from the Greek Pythagoreans and Hebrew cabalists to Christian sects (some still flourishing today) who found 666 (the "Mark of the Beast") in the names of eminent adversaries.

Kammerer sat for hours in public parks jotting down information about passersby—age, dress, sex, what they carried, and so on. He found a strange tendency for like things to cluster. A woman would pass in a red dress and then, unaccountably, other red dresses would swish past him. Kammerer firmly believed that higher laws were operating, that there was a "world-mosaic . . . which, in spite of constant shufflings and rearrangements, also takes care of bringing like and like together."

IT is hard to believe, but Koestler is impressed by this theory. He ties it to similar vews advanced by Jung, and argues that paranormal phenomena also may be a series of "confluential events" that are "a-causal manifestations of the Integrative Tendency" (page 122). The falling dice in Rhine's PK tests thus only *seem* to be manipulated by the will of the experimenter. In old-fashioned religious language, a crapshooter's prayers do not influence the bones directly. They are answered by a divine intermediary.

I urge Koestler to make the following simple experiment. It was invented by A. D. Moore, professor emeritus of electrical engineering at the University of Michigan. He calls it the "nonpareil mosaic" because he uses large quantities of tiny colored balls of nonpareils, a sugar candy made in Milwaukee. Fill a beaker with thousands of the little beads, half of them red, half green. Shake thoroughly, then inspect the beaker's sides. Do you see an intimate, homogeneous mixture? You do not. You see a marvelous mosaic: irregular large clumps of red interspersed with similar clumps of green. The pattern is so unexpected that most physicists, when they see it, suspect an electrostatic effect, or, in Kammerer's words, a "quasi-gravitational attraction between like and like."

Nothing is operating here except elementary laws of chance. A less dramatic but simpler demonstration of what statisticians sometimes call the "bunch effect" can be made with a deck of playing cards. Arrange the cards alternately red and black. Shuffle the deck thoroughly, as many times as you wish, then spread the cards. The bunching will be obvious. Runs of four or five cards of the same color are very common, and even longer runs of seven or more cards occur more often than most persons would expect.

IN spite of so many animadversions, I find Koestler's book far above the garbage in most popular books on parapsychology. He is particularly good at summarizing crisply some of the recent theories of the particle physicists, wild guesses about quarks, negative mass, anti-matter, backward-moving time, and so on. Modern science should indeed arouse in all of us a humility before the immensity of the unexplored and a tolerance for crazy hypotheses. But as for parapsychology, Koestler is a poor guide. He is too strongly biased by emotional commitments. He is too unaware of the queer sorts of controls necessary in a field in which deception, conscious and unconscious, is all too familiar.

KOESTLER obviously is convinced that paranormal phenomena lend credence to his pantheology, despite the number of atheists (e.g., Freud) who were and are on his side. I confess to having a different mind set. I consider it a spiritual blessing that you and I have isolated brains. I am happy we cannot communicate by ESP, that we cannot see through walls or move objects by PK, that spirits do not return from the dead to haunt us, like the head with half a face that Jung saw on his pillow when he slept in a haunted house in Buckinghamshire. (See Koestler's book, page 93.)

I do not believe that integrative tendencies were at work when Adam Clayton Powell died on the anniversary of the murder of Martin Luther King, or when the *AP*ollo 16 crew left for the moon on *AP*ril 16 from C*AP*e Kennedy, there being exactly sixteen letters from *A* to *P* inclusive. Above all, I am grateful to whatever gods there be that the future is mercifully hidden from us.

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The roots of coincidence

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