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“BIOLOGY WITHOUT METAPHYSICS: A BIRD WITHOUT WINGS”: ORLANDO CANAVESIO’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PARAPSYCHOLOGY

ALEJANDRO PARRA



Orlando Canavesio, 1948

SURGEON AND NEUROLOGIST, Orlando Canavesio, one of the pioneers of parapsychology in Argentina, was born in Buenos Aires in 1915. He was one of

the few Argentinean experts advancing the scientific diagnosis of mental disease. There are a number of short biographies (Berger & Berger, 1991; Las Heras, 1995) and historical reviews (Kreiman, 1987; Musso, 1973, Parra, 1990, 1994, 1995b) about Canavesio, and his work in the Latin American context deserves mention. He founded the Asociación Médica de Metapsíquica Argentina, AMMA (Argentinean Medical Association of Metapsychics) in 1946. This was the first organization to encourage physicians to explore parapsychology, and focused on medical and biological aspects of psychic phenomena.

The AMMA published the journal *Revista Médica de Metapsíquica*, of which only three issues were produced. Because at the time psychology was not yet an academic subject in Argentina (except under the control of physicians), psychiatry was the best way to approach the behavioural sciences. Possibly, if Canavesio was alive today, he would be a psychologist!

Canavesio experimented with a powerful new medical technology, electroencephalography (EEG), created by Hans Berger in 1929 (Blakemore, 1977). He was interested in using EEG in psychical research to study brain activity associated with ESP performance, which he referred to as the “metapsychic state”. Canavesio took EEG measurements under

experimental conditions, some of which he published in his own journal, while other studies have never been published. He studied self-claimed psychics such as the dowzers Enrique Marchessini and Luis Acquavella (also a physician and Canavesio's collaborator), Anne Carrell (wife of the Nobel Prize winner Alexis Carrell), Eric Couternay, Luck Federico Poletti and Conrado Castiglione, who worked as a psychometrist (Canavesio, 1947a; 1947b).

Canavesio's medical dissertation was entitled *Electroencefalografía en los Estados Metapsíquicos* (Electroencephalography in Metapsychic States). It was the first dissertation in Latin America based on a parapsychological topic, and it was accepted by the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Córdoba (Canavesio, 1951).

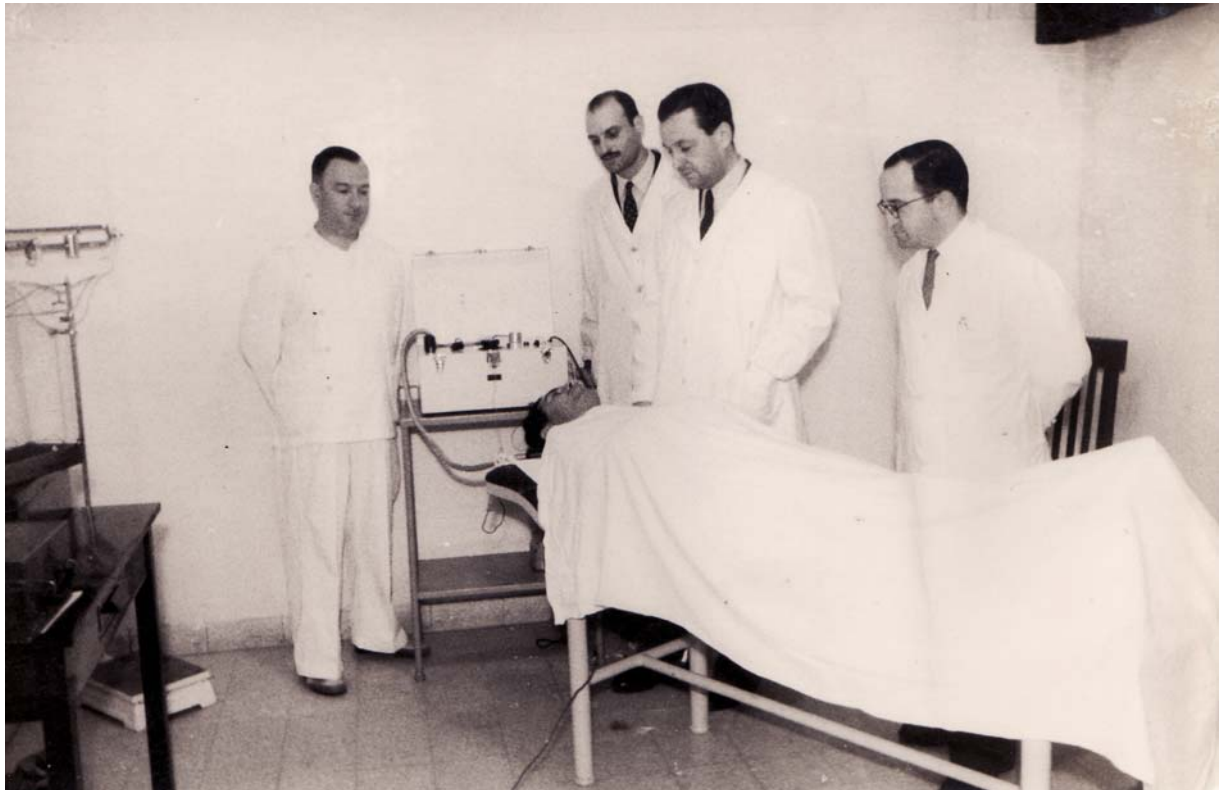
Canavesio attempted to place parapsychology within government institutions and universities. In 1948, Ramón Carrillo, who headed the Secretariat of Public Health of the Government of Argentina (then under the administration of President J. D. Peron and his wife Eva Duarte), created the Instituto de Psicopatología Aplicada, IPA (Institute of Applied Psychopathology (Estatutos del Instituto de Psicopatología Aplicada, 1948). Canavesio was appointed head of the IPA, which was established to determine whether the spiritualist movement could represent a public mental health concern (Canavesio, 1949). The Confederación Espiritista Argentina (Argentinean Spiritualist Confederation), which brought together the majority of the Argentinean spiritualist centres, made a formal agreement with Canavesio, as representative of the IPA, for mutual cooperation. Canavesio also was a strong defender of the incorporation of parapsychology (or metapsychics) in the division of psychological medicine at the faculties of medicine in Argentina.

Some of Canavesio's main studies included an early EEG study, and many comprehensive case studies of single psychics, such as Eric C.



Orlando Canavesio, 1945

Luck, one of his 'star' psychics. In a paper published in 1947, Canavesio said that states conducive to ESP ranged "from deep-sleep, normal or somnambulant, to an apparent wakefulness characterized by an expectant attention, concentration or isolation" (Canavesio, 1947c, p. 26). In one study, with psychic Alfredo Parodi, Canavesio (1947a) noticed a diminution of voltage of 50-70% in the cortex, but the actual frequency could not be established (some tracings, however, showed frequencies ranging from 11-13 Hz). In a study with psychic Eric Courtenay Luck, Canavesio (1948, p. 29) took EEG measures while Luck went into trance and reported that the "alpha rhythm disappears, becomes more or less regular, and the potential diminishes by 60%". Canavesio thought that dowsing performances were better suited for EEG testing.



Orlando Canavesi (second from the left) conducting neuropsychological research

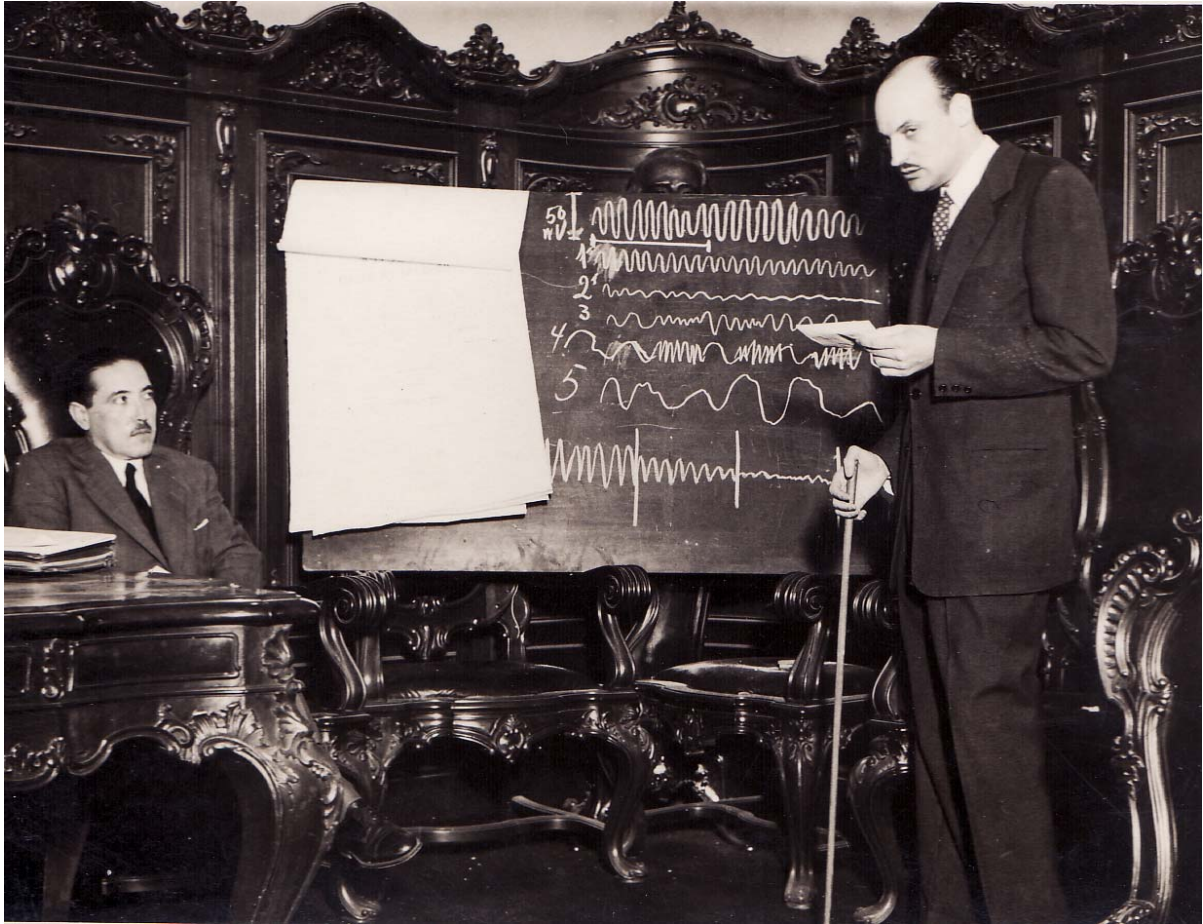
In addition, Canavesio participated in numerous public events. He gave a number of lectures in scholarly forums, as well as on radio programs, and in newspapers. His presentations sometimes included psychic performances of individuals such as E. C. Luck and L. Acquavella. Argentina was represented for the first time in one of the most important international parapsychological events when Canavesio participated in the First International Conference of Parapsychological Studies held at in Utrecht in 1953. He presented some of the work from his medical dissertation. It was a good opportunity to visit some cities in Europe. He also participated in a psychical research conference on parapsychology in Bologna (Canavesio, 1954).

Unfortunately, most of Canavesio's efforts had little impact, particularly after the fall of the administration of J. D. Perón in 1955. One aspect that possibly led to the neglect of his work was that the psychological movement displaced the medical approach to parapsychology, so that psychologists, and not physicians, were usually the professionals that were the most interested in and involved in parapsychology. Some felt that Canavesio's work had several pitfalls, and that it lacked

adequate methodological rigor. Canavesio's approach was mainly qualitative, instead of the quantitative approach used by some European psychical researchers.

In 1948, José Fernández and Canavesio founded the Sociedad Argentina de Parapsicología, SAP (Argentine Parapsychological Society), which connected all of those interested in modern parapsychology, following the approach of J. B. Rhine. The SAP published a series of monographs and organized other activities, most of which were influenced by spiritualist thinking. But it also included the ideas of J. B. Rhine, Gardner Murphy, S. G. Soal, and Ferdinando Cazzamali. However, critical differences within the newly formed society soon became evident (Musso, 1973). Spiritist members were brought together with non-spiritists, and members such as Musso and Canavesio, who disagreed with the spiritist viewpoint, eventually created another group known as the Instituto Argentino de Parapsicología (Argentine Institute for Parapsychology).

Canavesio was interested in other topics, such as dowsing, psychology, medicine, experimental psychopathology, and Jung's theories. He also participated in PK experiments



Orlando Canavesi presenting work from his doctoral thesis in 1951

(Feola, 1993; Parra, 1995a) conducted by parapsychologist José María Feola, who directed the 'Grupo de La Plata'. This group was a home-circle formed by non-spiritualists interested in the physical phenomena of Spiritualism, who carried out a series of experimental sessions involving table-tipping, table levitations, raps, and other phenomena, between 1950 and 1955.

On December 14, 1957, travelling to Mar del Plata city in his car, Orlando Canavesio had an accident, as a consequence of which his left leg had to be amputated. When he seemed to be on his way to recovery, J. R. Musso visited him, but Canavesio looked Musso in the eye and said: "No, Ricardo, I am going to die." (Noticias, 1957). He died soon afterwards. Canavesio was only thirty-eight years old, and was starting a new parapsychological society at Rafaela (Canavesio, 1956). Its guiding principle was expressed in a motto printed on the cover of the journal: "Biology without metapsychics, a bird without wings."

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THE TERM "SUPERNATURAL" IN WRITINGS BY NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPIRITUALISTS AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCHERS

CARLOS S. ALVARADO

THE WORD *supernatural*, commented on by Michael Thalbourne (2007) in the July issue of the *Review*, has been used in the past by some authors to refer to a variety of phenomena we would call today psychic or parapsychological. Examples of this usage from the nineteenth century are Charles Wyllis Elliott's *Mysteries; Or, Glimpses of the Supernatural* (1852), and Frederick George Lee's *The Other World; Or, Glimpses of the Supernatural* (1875).

In 1856 an author asked about the phenomena of spiritualism: "Are they all mere tricks, or are they natural phenomena, or are they supernatural?" (Ramsey, 1856, p. 61). While this author decided for the latter, opting for a Satanic explanation, other writers saw it differently. Lee (1875) used the term as a label to include a variety of such phenomena as apparitions. Instead of accepting 'interruptions' or 'violations' of nature, William H. Howitt conceptualized the issue in *The History of the Supernatural* (1863) as the action of spiritual principles "which in their occasional action

subdue, suspend, or neutralise the less powerful physical laws" (1863, Vol. 1, p. v).

Commenting on a variety of psychic phenomena, Catherine Crowe said in *The Night Side of Nature* (1848): "I do not propose to consider them as supernatural; on the contrary, I am persuaded that the time will come, when they will be reduced strictly within the bounds of science" (Vol. 1, p. 17). She was "disposed to extend the bounds of nature and science, till they comprise within their limits all the phenomena, ordinary and extraordinary, by which we are surrounded" (Vol. 1, p. 18).

Other writers also considered psychic phenomena as natural, in the sense of not being violations of the laws of nature (e.g., Kardec, 1860; Wallace, 1866). Alfred Russel Wallace wrote the following in his pamphlet, *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural*, about the existence and action of spiritual beings:

And if those powers were exerted in a manner to be perceived by us, the result would not be a miracle ... There would be no "violation of a law of