

Obituaries

First paper with Leonard Evans as one of the authors was the Beloff and Evans paper described in this obituary of John Beloff

John Beloff

Scientist who put parapsychology on the academic map

The psychologist John Beloff, who has died aged 86, was best known for initiating and nurturing the academic study of parapsychology in Britain. Born and educated in London, he was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who had settled near Hampstead Heath. He was the fourth of five children, one of whom was his older brother Max (later Lord) Beloff, the founding vice chancellor of Buckingham University.

In 1937, John began training at the Architectural Association in Bedford Square, but he found it profoundly unsatisfying. While serving in the army during the second world war, he was impressed by JB Rhine's book, *Extrasensory Perception*, which described painstaking efforts to obtain experimental evidence for psychic functioning.

So, after several unhappy years working in architectural offices, he enrolled as a psychology student at London University, first at Birkbeck College and then at University College. After taking his degree in 1952, he spent a year at the University of Illinois and then secured a faculty position at Queen's University, Belfast, where he obtained his doctorate in 1956. In 1962, he was appointed to the psychology department at Edinburgh University, where he remained until retirement.

Although parapsychology was an overriding interest, Beloff's first book, *The Existence of Mind* (1962), was a work in the philosophy of mind. Reacting against the analytical behaviourism of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, Beloff defended a form of dualism, and claimed that parapsychology provided evidence for that position. Although dualism was academically unfashionable, his book received favourable reviews, including one by AJ Ayer. It also attracted the attention of Rhine, who invited him to visit his laboratory in Durham, North Carolina, in 1965.

Beloff had already been conducting research in parapsychology. In 1961, he and a physics student, Leonard Evans, carried out an innovative experiment in psychokinesis (PK) – that is, roughly, mind over matter. In this experiment, radioactive decay served as a source of randomness, and the objective was to influence the radioactive source so that its particle emissions were non-random. This was the first instance of what later became a standard approach to PK research, and it marked an important advance over using more mathematically and physically complex objects (for example, falling dice or coins) as PK tar-

gets. Although the Beloff and Evans experiment yielded null results, their report has been cited more often than any other of his experimental papers.

By the time Beloff visited Rhine, he was already acquiring a reputation as a psi-inhibitory experimenter – that is, an experimenter whose presence seemed to discourage the appearance of evidence for psychic functioning. None of his experiments yielded positive results.

However, as a scholar and teacher, Beloff was profoundly influential. From the start, Edinburgh supported his interest in the paranormal; several students wrote dissertations on parapsychology under his mentorship. In 1983, Beloff was nominated as an executor of the will of his friend Arthur Koestler. Koestler gave his entire estate to establish a chair of parapsychology, and Beloff took a key role in finding a university to accept the gift. In 1985, Edinburgh accepted the chair (awarded to the late Robert Morris) and, as a result, parapsychological research has continued there to this day. Without doubt, Beloff's rigorous work in this area laid the groundwork for these subsequent developments.

In addition to many articles, Beloff wrote three other books and edited or co-edited two more. His second book, *Psychological Sciences* (1973) was a text in mainstream psychology, although it had a chapter on parapsychology. This was followed by *The Relentless Question: Reflections on the Paranormal* (1990) and *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (1993). During these years he was also an active member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), serving as council member, president in 1974 and 1982, and editor of the SPR's *Journal and Proceedings* for many years.

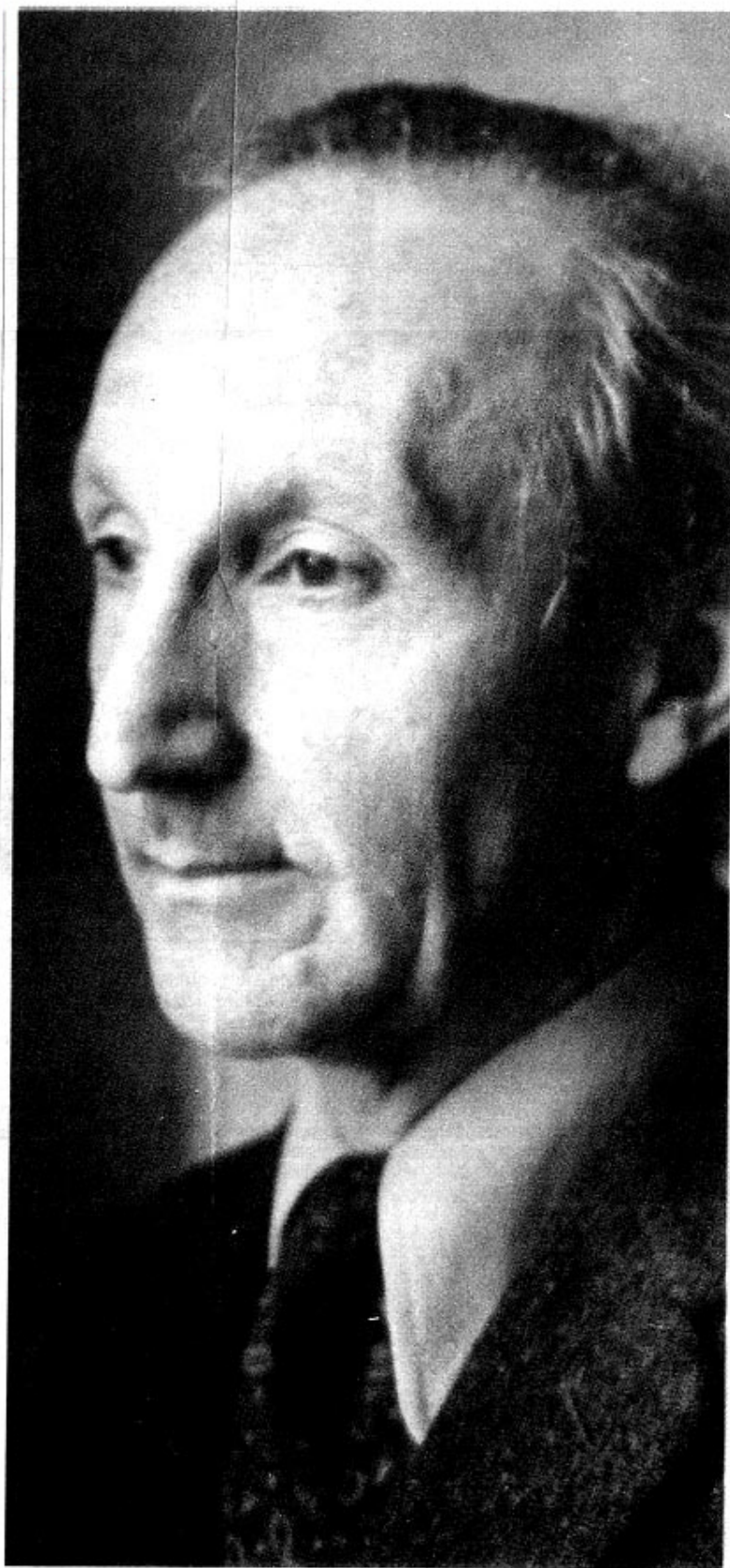
In an area where passions run high and opinions too often are guided by prejudice, Beloff relied on data and reason. He had no theistic inclinations; and always demonstrated an even-handed approach to the material and to opposing points of view. So although he never overtly encountered the paranormal first-hand, and although he never succeeded in obtaining evidence for psychic functioning in his own experiments, he saw no choice but to accept at least some of the evidence for ESP, PK, and survival of death.

Beloff was a collector of fine art and a supporter of voluntary euthanasia. He was honest, humble, gentle and often self-deprecating. But he was quietly passionate about his convictions, and a tenacious interlocutor. Beloff wanted no funeral, and he donated his body to medicine.

He is survived by his wife of 54 years, Halla, who forged a distinguished career for herself in social psychology, his daughter Zoe and son Bruno.

Stephen Braude

John Beloff, psychologist, born April 19 1920; died June 1 2006



While Beloff's experiments failed, his teaching could be inspirational