

PARAPSYCHOLOGY WITHOUT THE 'PARA' (OR THE 'PSYCHOLOGY')

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There's no question but that many people have closed minds regarding the claims of parapsychology. There's also no question but that this is a sad and – when the closed minds belong to philosophers and scientists – a shameful fact. While a case might be made for the necessity of a certain degree of closed-mindedness for scientists (for if you treat everything as equally possible, your investigation is unlikely ever to get off the ground), there's no such excuse for philosophers. The philosopher should be unrestricted by fashions in thought, including the unquestioning acceptance of whatever scientific theories are currently dominant. The fact is, however, that in this field and in the philosophy of mind, many if not most philosophers fall short of the philosophical ideal.

Unfortunately, those who approach the field of parapsychology with any seriousness tend to reach a galling conclusion: an open mind reaches much the same conclusions as does a closed one. Not precisely the same conclusions; the central difference is that the open mind concludes that some of the subject matter of parapsychology – the phenomena discovered through experiment, semi-experiment, and anecdote¹ – genuinely stands in need of investigation and explanation; the closed mind tends to reject the whole boiling, thus throwing out the baby with the bath water. Of course, the open mind makes no commitment to the paranormal nature of the phenomena, only to their occurrence and to the need for explanation.

So, if there really is something for parapsychologists to do, what's wrong with the way that they do it? In an article of this length, I have a limited number of options: I could gesture in a journalistic way at all the grounds for my criticisms of parapsychology; I could do the same sort of thing, but try to be more balanced; I could choose a few issues and deal with them more fully. Intellectual integrity dictates the third option.

SETTING THE SCENE

¹Roughly speaking, experimental evidence is gathered under laboratory conditions, anecdotal evidence is gathered from witnesses after the event, while semi-experimental evidence is gathered in the field, using scientific methods (I've taken this terminology from Braude [1986], p.1).

I'll take two parapsychological cases as my starting point; one's recent, the other's nearly forty years old. Picking just two examples is, of course, invidious, but I don't have space in an article of this length to give anything like a fair survey. First, the following study (Case-study A) was announced recently on various Usenet groups and on the w-ww:

Precognition Study — Web

Fiona Steinkamp

ABSTRACT: This project is funded by the Fundacao Bial. This study aims to see if true precognition is possible and it exploits the WWW in order to enable wider participation. This experiment is similar to the Laboratory experiment also listed. Participants are asked to take some time at home to meditate to themselves in order to gain impressions about a picture they will see some time later on the WWW. They then go to a Web-page designed specially for them where they will see four pictures. They compare these four pictures to the impressions they had earlier. A week later participants receive an email with a web site showing them which picture had later been randomly selected. All participants must report to me beforehand a precognition or premonition that they have had. If you would like to take part and you have had a precognitive experience, please email me. There is no restriction as to your current physical location - all you need is access to an email account and to the WWW.

My second example (Case-study B) comes from the early 1960s:²

Physiological Correlates of Psi Cognition

Charles T. Tart

ABSTRACT: In individual sessions, eleven college students sat in a soundproof chamber and tried to guess when 'subliminal stimuli' were presented. At random intervals either: (a) an agent in another soundproof room was electrically shocked; or (b) the shock was delivered to a resistor. The subjects' skin resistances, finger pulse volumes, and EEGs were continuously recorded, and the EEGs were electronically analysed.

The physiological responses of the subjects were significantly related to the occurrence of both types of events, showing a pattern for the group generally indicative of a higher level of activation during the trials, viz.: (a) a faster and more complex EEG pattern; (b) more frequent galvanic skin responses; and (c) more frequent changes in finger pulse volume. As the subjects' conscious guesses of when trials had occurred did not differ from chance, they may be said to have responded on an 'unconscious' level.

Note that I'm simply using these as examples from which to develop a general set of arguments; my criticisms should not be taken as applying specifically to these examples so much as to the discipline in which they occur. Nor do I take the mere existence of these studies to *prove* any of my points; they act as a springboard for my arguments.

²Tart [1963]

Now, I have three, closely related worries. The first concerns the fact that, 120 years after the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research in London, and nearly seventy years after J.B. Rhine launched his attempt to place psychical research on a modern scientific footing as *parapsychology*³, researchers are still spending much of their time trying to demonstrate that there's something to research into. The second worry concerns the appropriateness of the implication that we should be (or can be) concerned with *psychology* (para or otherwise). The third concerns the preconceptions, not to say begged questions, built into the terminology (and, I'd argue, the conceptual framework) of the subject. I'll start with the third worry, move on to the second, and finally deal with the first.

PRE-WHAT?

For decades philosophers have pointed out that much of the terminology of parapsychology is deeply deficient⁴. Terms such as 'extra-sensory perception', 'telepathy', 'psychokinesis', etc., all suffer from related difficulties, but in case-study A the terms 'precognition' and 'premonition' are the offending parties.

Let's assume for the moment that there's no problem with the prefix 'pre-' — that whatever is going on does genuinely involve a relationship between present and future events (actually I have considerable doubts about this, but the issues are more complex, and my argument doesn't demand that I go into them here); what, then, is wrong with the suffixes? Well, whatever the result of an experiment like this, it seems clearly not to involve *cognition* at all. The term 'cognition' is used to refer to the processes by which we gain knowledge, whatever those processes might be. Why does that raise a problem here?

First, note that the participants in experiments such as this can't tell whether they're members of the group whose choice of picture matches the one actually selected. Indeed, if a participant tries twice, and one of her choices matches while the other doesn't, typically she'll have no idea which was which — her two choices will feel just the same to her. This is more pressing once one realises that parapsychology (in common with many of the more established sciences) is concerned with statistics. Let's simplify the experiment considerably: given four pictures, none of which is more attractive or significant than the others, one would expect twenty-five out of a hundred participants to choose correctly; if thirty do so, then we have a statistically significant result. (Note a potential pitfall, incidentally: it's easy to make the mistake

³The term was actually introduced by William MacDougall.

⁴See, for example, Antony Flew's 'Analysing the concepts of parapsychology' (in Flew: 1987), and his introduction to the collection in which it appears.

of thinking that what needs explaining are the thirty correct choices, when in fact it's only the five choices above the expected result. And remember that neither we nor the participants know which those five choices are.) I have no problem with the claim that something here stands in need of explanation and further investigation. I do have a problem if the results are described in terms of cognition.

If such a description were to be justified, there would have to be reason to think that there was some way for the participants to distinguish between true and false choices, other than checking with the experimenter afterwards. I take it that, in order for a belief⁵ to count as knowledge, it must not only be true, but also have a relationship with the facts of the sort that Robert Nozick called *truth-tracking* (this can also be expressed more traditionally in terms of justification); there's no such thing as knowing by chance, just because one's beliefs happen to coincide with the way things are. That's not what we mean by 'knowledge'. Yet to refer to *precognition* is to imply that, in experiments like the one described above, a positive result is evidence for the subjects' gaining knowledge in unexplained ways. And that means that, if the experimenter ever gets round to trying to explain what's going on or how it's happening – rather than merely establishing for the umpteenth time that there's something to be explained – she'll be working in the shadow of a significant begged question.

Steinkamp also refers to the possibility of *premonitions*. The term 'premonition' is an odd one here, quite apart from any philosophical issues; why should participants feel a sense of foreboding, or be *warned* of the future? I think that this is simply a philosophically irrelevant misuse of language, but we can still draw something from it. Perhaps the underlying thought is that the experiment, rather than dealing with knowledge and belief, is dealing with *feelings* of some kind (if so, how about replacing 'precognition' with 'presentience' (or even 'presentimentality')? Or, to fit with 'telepathy', maybe 'propathy'?). This is an approach which has found favour with some writers; it certainly avoids some of the criticism that I've raised against precognition — but by no means all. The main problem is that most experiments in the field demonstrate that the subjects *feel* no difference between correct and incorrect guesses; whatever's going on, it's just not at the level of consciousness, whether we're talking about cognitive states or feelings. Which leads me to my next worry.

⁵I'm not even convinced that in most cases there's a relevant *belief*, but that's another argument for another occasion.

“YOU GOT AN OLOGY, YOU’RE A SCIENTIST”

There’s a wider problem. It’s not simply that parapsychologists tend to assume that we’re dealing with knowledge and beliefs (or feelings) when there’s no reason to suppose (and some reason to deny) that we’re dealing with any such thing. The question we need to ask is: are we dealing with the mind at all? Tart, in case-study B, attempts to evade the problem of the misuse of ‘cognition’ by using a redefinition of the term:

For the purposes of this paper, ‘psi cognition’ refers to the process or processes operative when a significant correlation is found between behavioural and/or physiological events in a living organism and some other real world event, when, according to our present knowledge of physics, no relevant information about the event could have reached the organism.⁶

This might seem at first glance to do the job; however, it not only fails to do so, it raises further worries.

First, however carefully one redefines a term such as ‘cognition’ in order to turn it into a technical term, it still has the power to mislead; it has clear associations with notions such as knowledge, perception, and so on. More importantly, though, if we’re to take Tart’s definition seriously, we’re led inexorably to the conclusion that, not only has his study nothing to do with cognition in the normal sense of gaining knowledge, it has nothing to do with psychology at all. At best, the experiments with students show that there’s some connection between one set of physical events (electric shocks administered to an ‘agent’) and another set of physical events (“The physiological responses of the subjects”).

As we’ve seen, Tart tries to evade this conclusion; although there’s no question of the students gaining any knowledge, or even forming any beliefs beyond guesses which “did not differ from chance”, nevertheless “they may be said to have responded on an ‘unconscious’ level.” I don’t blame Tart for putting ‘unconscious’ in inverted commas; there’s neither evidence nor other reason for saying anything more than that the students responded on a *non*-conscious level. That is, they responded purely physiologically. Psychology seems simply to have nothing whatsoever to do with it, and gesturing at the unconscious doesn’t help.

Note also another word used by Tart — ‘information’: “no relevant information about the event could have reached the organism.” This looks like another attempt, conscious or otherwise, to sneak cognition in the normal sense back into the case-study. If I fall off a cliff, I haven’t received information about gravity; if my pupils contract when the sun is bright, I haven’t received information about the light. What Tart actually seems to be referring to is the fact that,

⁶Tart [1963], p.375

according to our present knowledge of physics, no causal mechanism exists to explain the correlation between the two sets of physical events in the experiment. This fits with the usage of 'information' (regrettable, in my opinion) often found in cognitive 'science' — namely, processing information which is an input characterised as various forms of energy, or stimulation pulses, or neuronal discharges, or the like. In other words, not information at all, but physiological states.

It's true, of course, that there's a perfectly legitimate rôle for psychology in the field of what might be called the 'paranormal' (I'm not very keen on this label, but it's better than 'parapsychology', if only because it begs fewer questions). After all, on the one hand we have whatever's going on in the world, and on the other there's the undeniable fact that it sometimes, at least, has effects on us as thinking and experiencing beings — on our minds. Unless and until it can be shown that the actual goings on are mind-related in the right way (and the vast majority of experiments – including Tart's and, I dare predict, Steinkamp's – suggest otherwise), then parapsychologists are jumping the gun.

In fact, even if talk of *cognition* (or of feelings) were justifiable, there'd still be something of a problem; the concentration on the 'experiencers' would be, while understandable, not easily defensible. Imagine the effect on the history of science if seventeenth-century researchers had approached Galileo's observations of Jupiter's moons and sun spots in the style of parapsychologists; instead of developing relevant theories of optics (and cosmology) and improving their instruments, they'd have spent the next century asking questions like: 'Why is it that some people can see these moons and others can't?' or even: 'This study aims to see if observation of Jupiter's moons is possible, and it exploits the newfangled postal service in order to enable wider participation.'

BEYOND EXPLANATION?

I've suggested, then, that certain phenomena studied by parapsychologists are question-beggingly labelled, and that this goes hand in hand with a general tendency to make assumptions about them: namely, that they involve belief and knowledge. I've also voiced a more general worry; the concentration on subjects – thought of as cognisers, perceivers, agents – seems to be largely misplaced, so that the term 'parapsychology' is at best misleading ('psychical research' is no better, of course). Investigation discloses, in fact, that the problems that the believer in 'precognition', for example, must deal with are mostly unrelated to psychology; they concern such issues as backwards causation, the nature of time, discovering and theorising about the laws that govern the phenomena, and so on. If it's necessary to use a single descriptive name for the

discipline, then – aside from ‘paranormal’ – a better choice would seem to be ‘paraphysics’ (or, if the human subjects really must be kept at centre stage, ‘paraphysiology’ or ‘parabiology’).

I’m not claiming that parapsychology does nothing but attempt to demonstrate that certain phenomena genuinely occur, nor that it does this by concentrating solely on amassing data about individuals, nor that there’s no legitimate rôle for such data-gathering exercises, nor that there are absolutely no attempts to provide some sort of *explanation* of those phenomena. I am claiming, though, that far too much time is spent on the individuals rather than the phenomena, and on the data-gathering rather than the explanation-development — and in each case it’s the latter that should be at the heart of any genuine developed science.

In fact where explanations of the phenomena have been developed, this has often come from interested philosophers, mathematicians, psychologists, and the like rather than from parapsychologists. Whether such explanations are satisfactory is another matter, for another occasion. There’s an unfortunate tendency to treat labels such as ‘precognition’ or ‘telepathy’ as if they were themselves explanatory: Q. ‘How do we explain this result?’ A. ‘Oh, it’s a case of precognition!’ (There’s a flavour here of the supposedly explanatory appeal to the dormitive principle of opium in Molière’s *Le Malade Imaginaire*.)

For some – a very few, I should imagine – a further worry might play a rôle in all this. The notion of paranormality is a negative one; the term is generally taken to mean something like ‘beyond (normal scientific) explanation’. Now, if parapsychologists were to establish acceptable, scientifically accepted explanations of the phenomena under study – and the vast majority of parapsychologists claim (and strive) to be doing science – then those phenomena can no longer count as paranormal. Reflection on this suggests a more radical conclusion: *any* new phenomenon will be beyond current normal scientific explanation — whether it be a quasar, the transmission of light through a vacuum, or above-average success at guessing symbols on unseen cards. What makes the subject matter of parapsychologists paranormal, then? Two possibilities occur: either such phenomena are held to be essentially beyond scientific explanation (in which case parapsychology has to relinquish its scientific status), or ‘paranormal’ just means ‘not presently accepted by non-parapsychological science’ (in which case parapsychology’s aim is to relinquish its separate identity. Thus parapsychologists define what they do as outside mainstream science, and then they spend much of their time struggling to bring it within the mainstream fold.

It’s true, of course, that we have here a discipline under unusual pressure; there are few if any others whose very subject matter is rejected by most of their critics. But surely it’s up to those working in the field to stand up to such critics, rather than giving in by allowing them to dictate the content and approach of the discipline. The critics of atomism were defeated, not by

experiments designed to prove that atoms and molecules existed, but by the work of physicists such as Jean Perrin, who in *Les Atomes* (Paris: Alcan, 1913) gave thirteen ways to calculate Avogadro's number precisely — each way independent of the others. As Stathis Psillos puts it:

'Unless we accept [atoms'] reality, we can hardly explain the observable phenomena. Nor can we explain that we can calculate with such great precision how many atoms there are in a certain volume. [...] The very fact that the atomic hypothesis finds empirical support in the many and distinct domains in which atoms supposedly operate causally to generate real, observable phenomena gives good reason to accept that atoms are real. (*Scientific Realism* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.22)

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SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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