

Chris Bratcher - Can Humanists Countenance Psychic Phenomena?

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You may say 'no' to my question because you dislike the term 'psychic'. It seems to refer to question-begging, unknown, mentalistic causes. Your doubts about it are shared by everyone who researches the phenomena: and they use the collective term 'psi' for them instead.

The Society for Psychical Research ('S.P.R.') defines its field in negative terms. The Society was founded in 1882 'to examine without prejudice or prepossession, and in a scientific spirit, those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis'. The term 'Psychic' is therefore synonymous with apparently inexplicable human powers. Alternative terms of convenience are 'paranormal', or even 'anomalous': ie, relating to events not normally generated, or not to be predicted by theory. Whatever term is chosen acts as an umbrella for a mixed bunch of happenings that are acknowledged to be likely to have disparate causes.

'Humanist' is also a slippery concept. The least imprecise of many dictionary definitions are also negative: eg, a person who is against superstition.' or who does not believe in a supernatural being or explanation. As 'supernatural' is also defined negatively, I think there is little to choose between the difficulties of the S.P.R., and a humanist Society, in respectively expressing their objects of study, and what they are against.

Psi has had a particularly bad press with humanists, because it has been identified with the phenomena of seances, which in turn have been clothed in an unsatisfactory interpretation, that of spiritualism. Although psi is not to be identified with the latter, there is a copious record of mediums having been able to dramatise the voice patterns and personality of a deceased, and to regurgitate private information (as well as muslin!), unknown to the sitter that consults them incognito - sometimes on behalf of an undisclosed third party.

But countenancing these (or more humdrum) happenings does not impel a choice between a fraudulent, a supernatural or, indeed, any explanation. A bad explanation is worse than none. In default of this, I do not go beyond the evidence, hopefully after submitting it to reasonable investigation. The negative definition of psi does not, in particular, invite a religious explanation. There is no reason why humanists, as such, should not countenance psi of a particular kind, if the evidence alone is compelling. Conceding that an event appears to have occurred, does not imply building a Lourdes shrine around it! (To digress: in my view, the only useful connection between psychical phenomena and the Christian religion are possible secular parallels to certain miracle and resurrection stories. It is not something that remotely exercises me: but if, per impossible, one were to get historical evidence of the gospel accounts, Jesus might be revealed, stripped of Judaeo-Christian mumbo-jumbo, as a not wholly unfamiliar catalyst of psychic events.)

Irrational disbelief is as pernicious as irrational belief. Victor Hugo said that 'He who denies the reality of psychic phenomena proves his ignorance or untruthfulness' [1]. I think absolute denial more often shows up fears: of countenancing - inwardly, and more so to others - that such things might be; and, particularly, of leaving headroom for the resurrection of a Pandora's box of prescientific credos - the risk of which is quite unfairly

correlated with psychical research. We should not dismiss events because others weave them into their mythologies. However, I don't wish to be wilfully provocative; nor do I expect you to be convinced by anecdotal evidence; which, if worthwhile, is too detailed for this lecture. Similarly, however, attempts by the debunker, James Randi, to explain his own selection of occurrences, under his own description, as replicable by conjuring, should carry no universal weight. The well known principle of ethics, " 'Must' implies 'can'", does not 'Work in reverse. My talk was limited to a small selection of experiments and phenomena with which you may be less than all too familiar.

'Psychokinesis', or PK (for short), is the label for an inexplicable alteration in a physical state¹. It is the form of psi that interests me most, because it is the most easily and objectively recordable. Perhaps the natural form is the poltergeist (noisy spirit) event. Here is a precis of the Rosenheim case of 1967/8 [ii]. A lawyer's office was plagued by logs of impossibly frequent phone calls, power surges and blown fuses. The utilities' engineers could not explain it, and Prof H Bender of the University of Freiburg, and two physicists from the Max Planck Institute were asked to investigate. The apparent focus was 19 year old Annemarie S: when she walked along a corridor, pictures and lamps began to swing with increasing force, and were recorded on film; some forty witnesses testified to seeing inexplicable effects. Not surprisingly, she left for another job, where the effects continued for a time before dying away. Preponderantly teenage foci for the events (historically, girls) caused early Freudian researchers to link the effect with puberty, sexual tension, repression and/or abuse; but compulsive attention seeking (which of course gives rise to fraud) may be part of the psychological profile. But what induces the physical force deployed?

PK in the forms of metal bending, and other paranormal movement of objects, including table turning, are possibly the result of controlled poltergeist ability. Very few people involved in PR put any store in Uri Geller. He was plucked from the world of second rate conjuring, and is best left there. There is infinitely more impressive research into metal bending by John Hasted [iii], former Prof of Physics at Birkbeck, and by French researchers Crussard & Bouvaist on J P Girard. I have seen Hasted's results for myself; I am not a metallurgist, so my characterisations are a little crude, as well as overabbreviated.

They include: the bending of metal in sealed tubes. sometimes simultaneous multiple instances of action at a distance detected by strain gauges embedded in targets, that produce electrical signals linked to chart recorders; videotaped 'impossible effects' with contact: the bending of rods requiring more than physical strength; of hyper-brittle alloy metal bars; 'plastic' deformation; local hardening of metals as if under heavy compression, but with the pattern of strain/dislocation suggesting internal stresses; and strips of metal, embedded with radioactive (traceable) caesium, showing local rearrangement of atomic structure at their bends.

It is, of course, an accepted (if cripplingly expensive) constraint, that evidence has to be filmed, and that the filming has to be witnessed (even itself filmed), to be given credence. You may have seen a film of the Russian psychic Nina Kalugina straining to propel objects across a table: heavy breathing, believe me, will not achieve this, and Russian researchers would not have exposed themselves to ridicule (and state censure) lightly.

Laboratory investigation of PK began with subjects being asked to influence two dice thrown mechanically, eg to produce a total score of seven (to eliminate die bias). Discovering apparently gifted individuals and getting them to a laboratory is difficult. So

research into all areas of psi has often been concerned to establish a significant effect across the population at large. Deviations from chance on particular runs of throws are usually very small.

I admit to my own irrationality in not being impressed by deviations that are not achieved by particular variables or individuals (ie, who score markedly above chance themselves), even though uniformity alone may convince sceptics that fraud has been eliminated. The psychic researcher is in a no win situation in this regard! If one believes, as I do, that, if psi of any kind has reality, it is to be found in rare neurological and bioplasmic capacities of some individuals, then the accusation can always be made, if not supported.

Howbeit, small deviations gain significance over large numbers. 73 studies in English language journals from 1935 - 1987, amassing 2.6 million throws, were summed [iv] to yield odds of a billion to one against chance. Such experiments were overtaken by attempts to influence random number generators, over a sequence of predetermined length. (Radioactive decay generates a random emission of an electron. When a geiger counter detects this, a counter driven by a high speed oscillator stops to 'generate' a number) Meta-analysis of 832 RNG studies by Radin & Nelson in 1988 showed odds of a trillion to one! More interestingly, the hit rate is remarkably similar to that shown in the die experiments. A smaller run of experiments (1262) at Princeton (Prof Jahn: the subject of a TV documentary) produced odds of 4000 to one. As mentioned, there appear to be no star performers in these mind-numbingly boring exercises, but teaming partners of the opposite sex, for example, produced far more significant results, and such deviations can be used to plan experiments and predict outcomes.

The same results appear in the field of esp (extra-sensory perception): where subjects are asked to guess which light on a display, corresponding to a random number, will be - or has been - lit, rather than to bias the event. Much ingenuity has gone into designing experiments to distinguish between the two effects; and significant results have been found across populations subjected to sensory suppression (the Ganzfeld: a promising area, that would imply that there are real effects independent of star (or fraudulent) performers, that can be correlated).

I leave this area with the comment by a distinguished critic of parapsychology, Ray Hyman, of the Boeing research physicist, Helmut Schmidt, who was a prime mover in such experimentation in the 1970s: 'Schmidt's work is the most challenging ever to confront critics such as myself. His approach makes many of the earlier criticisms of parapsychological research obsolete. If there are flaws in his work, they are not the most common or obvious ones.'

However, no-one would be moved to trawl the population at large, if it were not for dramatic spontaneous cases. The original parlour game phenomenon of table turning, as classically described in three books by W J Crawford [2v] is still alive and kicking. I mention it because of personal experience. Those sitting at the table attempt to induce movement, usually in stages; of rocking, gliding, and eventual levitation without contact. I cannot display the evidence to you, and it is open to endless argument about fraud, which I cannot rule out in the two or three persuasively dramatic events, out of many, many, unconvincing sessions at which I participated. Tradition would have the experiment performed in near darkness, for psychological, as well as presumed physical reasons, although the remarkable psychic, DD Home, who merits a talk on his own, preferred to conduct his seances in bright light [vi]. Natural scepticism can now be allayed, to some extent, by filming in infra-red.

By definition, the SPR should do itself out of a job, by hiving off phenomena to areas of science as hypotheses begin to pass muster. (Somewhat similarly, the humanist movement might already be doing likewise, as its views become received opinion.) But, although the phenomena in the field are regularly reported, are of recognisable types, and, I would claim, some (such as metal bending) are repeatedly generated in controlled conditions, by university investigators with a far greater awareness of the need to eliminate fraud than is customary in scientific research into elusive particles, yet the physical sciences show no sign of wishing to take the phenomena off the Society's hands; and without this, physics hypotheses cannot emerge.

Yet former presidents of the Society include four holders of the OM.: the Earl of Balfour (fellow PM, Gladstone, said of it: 'The most important work being done in the world!'); Gilbert Murray; Sir William Crookes, and Lord Rayleigh - the last two were knighted Fellows of the Royal Society, as were the biologist (and convinced Darwinian) Alistair Hardy, and chemist Oliver Lodge. Oxbridge philosophy has provided Professors Sidgwick, Broad and Price; Psychology, William James; and Physiology, Nobell laureate Charles Richet. I guess many of you think that Darwinian thought put paid to the possibility of the psychic. I am comforted that Alfred Wallace, the originator of the theory of Evolution with Darwin, found himself compelled to accept the phenomena 'as proved quite as well as any facts are proved in other sciences', after initial thoroughgoing scepticism. Enough name dropping.

I conclude that the natural membership of SPES and the SPR should overlap, and both are, in the famous two word entry for the Earth in The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, 'mostly harmless'.

The compiler of 'The Hitchhiker Guide' entry, having heard of both Religion and Humanism (with some difficulty, as some sort of connected activity), might have wrongly measured the strength of both by attendance in communal halls on Sundays. Until I came here, I would have said that humanists do not appear to turn up, at least regularly and predictably, anywhere particular that day; and that you shared with psychic phenomena an alledged repeatability problem. But one cannot expect from human beings behaviour as predictable as chemicals in flasks. You know that the quality and importance of the event is rather more relevant to putting in an appearance, and that repeatability, per se, is not the most meritorious of human traits, I hope you can be equally persuaded to apply that logic to psychic phenomena.

References

i Victor Hugo, Postscript of my life

ii Gauld & Cornell, Poltergeists, RKP, 1979

iii Hasted, The Metal Benders, RKP, 1980

iv Radin & Ferrari, Effects of consciousness on the fall of dice: a meta-analysis (Journal of Scientific Exploration, 5, 1991); and see Radin, The Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth of Psychic phenomena, Harper Collins, 1997

v The Reality of Psychic Phenomena, Experiments in Psychical Science, and The Psychic Structures at the Goligher Circle, Watkins, 1916, 1919, and 1921.

vi Eg, in Earl of Dunraven, Experiences in Spiritualism with DD Home, Proc SPR, 1924

Notes

[1] Difficulties of definition are particularly evident in the term. As such, it could encompass every sort of psychic event. As all consciousness involves a flux of brain states, if I 'see', say, the future or the hidden present, changes in my visual cortex will occur that are inexplicable, in terms of what known sensory inputs I have had. However, customarily, the 'PK' categorisation is not used in such cases, unless it is supposed that it is being applied to a particular link in the causal chain, and the outcome in consciousness is secondary! I hope you are sympathetic to the difficulties definitions themselves' cause!

[2] Crawford, a lecturer in mechanical engineering, placed his medium, who apparently occasioned levitations of tables at a distance over many years, on weighing machines, that showed her weight to increase by that of the table, and photographed and analysed supposed tissue extrusions [ectoplasm] from orifices as the means of leverage.