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Parapsychology and Causality

By John G. Lauff, M. A., S.T.B.

To many readers the word *parapsychology* probably means a study of ghosts, miracles, and other things unsuited to serious inquiry. The writer intends to present arguments both for and against the scientific stature the parapsychologists claim for their work. Parapsychology is considered as a special aspect of the more general areas of human knowledge and causality. Most recent research projects involve the extrasensory aspects of parapsychology and these will be our major emphasis.

The Modern Trend

There has been an ever increasing interest in parapsychology in university and government research. Projects are current in several American universities¹ and in the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, Holland, India, and Argentina, among others.² At the University of Freiburg, Germany, and at Rhodes University, South Africa, parapsychology has achieved genuine academic status in the teaching curriculum.³

Parapsychology has even joined the space-race as a possible solution to the problem of conditioning and communicating with astronauts. In Russia, the physiologist Leonid L. Vasiliev has published a book called *Long Distance Suggestion* which had an amazing initial printing of 120,000 copies.⁴ His other work called *Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche* has had a total printing of 275,000 copies. Both works are concerned with theory and applications.

Our federal government has also spent money for parapsychological research. Tests were performed to determine if parapsychology could solve the secret of the homing ability in pigeons.⁵ The results were inconclusive, chiefly because the tests did not eliminate other factors (such as geographic and celestial orientation).

The new field of cybernetics has rekindled an interest in possible applications of parapsychology. The Russians especially are investigating ways of using unusual mental phenomena for mechanical and electronic applications.⁶ But all this does not

1 Besides the best known work of Dr. J. B. Rhine at Duke University, there are projects at New York City College, Newark College of Engineering, and the University of Pittsburgh.

2 W. C. Stone and N. L. Browning, *The Other Side of the Mind*, Englewood Cliff, N.J., Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964, p. 12.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

4 For a review of Professor Vasiliev's book, see *The Journal of Parapsychology*, Durham, Vol. 28 No. 2 (June, 1964), pp. 138-140.

5 J. Gaither Pratt, *Parapsychology: An Insider's View of ESP*, New York, Doubleday & Co., 1964, pp. 237-271. Professor Pratt is Dr. J. B. Rhine's assistant at Duke University.

6 W. C. Stone and N. L. Browning, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-197.

mean that parapsychology has gained general acceptance as a science.

Rene Sudre, probably the most prominent parapsychologist in France, believes that parapsychology is an embryonic study:

In spite of the efforts of a few pioneers, psychical research, even dignified by the title of parapsychology, is still in a state of great confusion and empiricism. It has not produced sufficient proof for official recognition. Besides, metapsychists themselves are not in agreement about which facts they consider to be established. They have not yet eliminated a mass of malobservation which, uncritically reproduced by overcredulous writers, leads research astray and gives rise to all kinds of misconceptions. The ground to be cleared is covered with the brambles of superstition.⁷

Writers who are otherwise favorable to parapsychology sometimes make sweeping criticisms. For example, F. S. Edsall states that the overwhelming evidence for ESP really rests on the test records of a relatively small number of persons, discovered and tested by different experimenters.⁸ This is typical of comments which tend to diminish the claim to scientific status.

Is It Extrasensory?

Much of the research aimed at making parapsychology more scientific is concerned with experiments that produce unusual results. The term *Extra-Sensory Perception*, or ESP, was invented by Dr. J. B. Rhine of the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University. It is the result of his conclusion that normal knowledge by means of the senses was not at work in certain subjects who seemed to produce outstanding results in card-guessing experiments. When these experiments were first performed in the early 1930's there were cries of fraud and much criticism of the statistical procedures used by Dr. Rhine and his associates. Rhine corrected his statistical methods but doubts persisted among critics such as Sudre:

If we accept the statistical laws of our time there is no more to be said; Rhine has used them sensibly and under the guidance of experts. Where one might find fault with him is in the ease with which he accepts a fact as established by an average differing little from chance. It is a matter of degree; certainty is not established by a slight deviation from expectation. Decimals have never convinced anyone; doubt arises when the figures disagree with common sense.⁹

7 Rene Sudre, *Parapsychology*, New York, Grove Press, 1962, p. 72.

8 F. S. Edsall, *The World of Psychic Phenomena*, New York, David McKay Co., 1958, p. 184.

9 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Most observers agree that ESP and similar phenomena are unusual and seem to obey no known laws of the physical world. For this reason, these unusual events are called *paranormal*, involving either the world of matter or the world of spirit. There are also two general opinions as to whether the phenomena of parapsychology are a higher form of communications in man. Some say it is a relic of primitive communication methods in pre-historic man.¹⁰ According to this view, animals and primitive tribes should be a good place to investigate parapsychology. The other view is that ESP and related parapsychological occurrences are a higher phase into which man is evolving. This is particularly the opinion regarding precognition and knowledge of the future.

Professor Emilio Servadio of Rome believes that the paranormal seems to be produced only when certain defence mechanisms, psychological or psychophysiological, designed to integrate or to protect our individual life, do not fulfill their function. According to this authority, the phenomena in question are physical as well as psychological.¹¹

Does the type of knowledge involved in parapsychology correspond more closely to the scholastic notion of sensory knowledge or that of intellectual knowledge? The safer answer, according to the principle of economy, is to say that whatever knowledge might be involved is sensory. That is to say, it involves the singular, particular, physical event—and not the abstract essence of a material thing. We may well ask if perhaps the type of knowledge involved is, strictly, neither sensory nor intellectual. There seems to be grounds for maintaining that the type of knowledge involved in parapsychology most closely corresponds to what St. Thomas Aquinas would call *connatural knowledge*.¹² This is a strange type of knowledge that springs up between two beings of similar natures. Some call it the knowledge of love or non-conceptualized knowledge. Because it is a type of knowledge that does not involve concepts, it is difficult to explain or communicate to others.¹³

Sudre dislikes the term “extrasensory perception.” He believes that the term expresses a prejudice about the nature of the phenomenon.¹⁴ He then makes the curious statement that “the transmission of an idea has nothing in common with a perceptive act.”¹⁵ One wonders exactly what he means by perception. Sudre then states that parapsychology is dominated by a single question, the way in which the

10 F. S. Edsall, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

11 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

12 One critic maintains that emotional ideas, rather than purely intellectual notions, are easiest to transfer. See Kenneth Walker, *The Extra-Sensory Mind*, New York, Emerson Books Inc., 1961, p. 80.

13 “Human reason feels at home in a world of things, whose essences and laws it can grasp and define in terms of concepts; but shy and ill at ease in a world of existences, because to exist is an act, not a thing.” Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1941, p. 67.

14 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

15 *Ibid.*

mind obtains information without sensory means.¹⁶ There seems to be no place in parapsychology for the classical position that all knowledge begins in the senses or the notion that nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses.

Some critics of parapsychology say it is not scientific merely because experiments cannot be reproduced at will and with certainty of success in a laboratory. This is an invalid objection since it would refuse to consider scientific any results which did not conform to a rigid physicochemical determinism. In any case there are facts of nature which defy experimental reproduction, by their complexity as well as their large scale (in meteorology, for example).¹⁷

Several experimenters have tried to duplicate the work of the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory, without success. With negative results, there is a tendency of these independent investigators to claim fraud. The point is that the experiments cannot be reproduced at will. Dr. Rhine goes to great length to emphasize the importance of the psychological setting of an experiment.¹⁸ A lack of confidence on the part of either the subject or the experimenter can result in mere chance expectations.¹⁹

The same subject can produce unusual results one day and nothing of significance the next day.²⁰ In laboratory testing, a subject has no dependable, conscious knowledge of whether he is doing well or not. Nor does the subject know when he is performing at better than chance expectation.²¹ This is another peculiar aspect of the type of knowledge involved in parapsychology. Sudre believes that the creation of an emotional atmosphere is one of the most important factors in successful experiments.²² Also, the information communicated may reach the consciousness of the percipient in symbolic form.²³ It is interesting to note that for Sudre such communication is of the material order.²⁴ It is strange that he later claims that parapsychology lends itself less than any other human phenomenon to physical explanations.²⁵

16 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

17 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

18 J. B. Rhine, *The Reach of the Mind*, London, Faber and Faber, 1948, p. 134.

19 F. S. Edsall, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-191.

20 *Ibid.*

21 S. G. Soal and F. Bateman, *Modern Experiments in Telepathy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1953, p. 74 and p. 327.

22 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

23 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

24 "But whatever one's opinion of the nature of the mind, the hypothesis of material communication between two brains in the telepathic act is a legitimate one." Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

25 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

The most prominent philosopher cited and quoted by parapsychologists is Henri Bergson. Sudre states:

. . . it is difficult to see any theory that can explain the facts other than immediate paranormal perception. We shall see that this is not excessively fanciful, for it was admitted in principle by Bergson. Indeed, he placed perception in things themselves and reduced sensory impressions to a stimulatory process, depending on the brain and not on the mind. Knowledge of the external world, although translated into sensory images, could thus theoretically be obtained without the mediation of the senses.²⁶

We must remind ourselves that the type of knowledge involved in parapsychology is not the type normally accepted. The parapsychologists were not the first to add a new dimension to the idea of knowledge. The Criticism of Kant and the Positivism of Comte have this in common, that in both doctrines the notion of knowledge is reduced to that of scientific knowledge, and the notion of scientific knowledge itself to the type of intelligibility provided by the physics of Newton. The verb “to know” then means to express observable relations between given facts in terms of mathematical relations.²⁷

Statements such as the following indicate the extent of the battle between the modern parapsychologist and the average physiologist: “In studying the physical phenomena of telepathy, it is possible to lose sight of the fact that the problem cannot be entirely solved without also solving that of the interaction of mind and body.”²⁸ “We can see today that the *rapport* could not possibly be material or electromagnetic. It must be considered entirely psychic.”²⁹ Dr. Rhine, as well as others, believes that in some way extrasensory perception transcends the normal limitations of space and time. ESP operates just as well whether the sender and receiver are near each other or separated by short or long distances. Laboratory testing has also confirmed ESP’s independence of time. Card-guessing tests have turned up better-than-chance results in situations set up a day or a week *before* or a day or week later than the time the subject made his secret and securely hidden records.³⁰

ESP phenomena, such as telepathy or clairvoyance, are of a type that has no place in the physical universe—as modern physics has described it. They show a contact with or response to distant events which no known force or radiation can

26 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 188. For a fuller discussion of the applications of Bergson’s theory, see R. Heywood, *Beyond the Reach of Sense*, New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1961, appendix.

27 Etienne Gilson, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

28 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

29 Rene Sudre, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

30 F. S. Edsall, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-191.

explain. They seem to be unaffected by distance and intervening obstacles. Psychokinesis, a cognate effect accepted by most parapsychologists, represents something that physicists have long assumed to be impossible: a direct response by a physical system to the wish of an observer.³¹ In any event, the actual operation of ESP seems to be unaffected either by distance as such, or by time as such.³²

Parapsychologists feel that modern research in several fields is likely to give support for their point of view:

Both atomic physics and meson physics, as well as the fascinating field of gene mutations in biology, provide the imagination with exciting possibilities for the future of psychic research. It may no longer be necessary to step outside the physical realm for explanations of psi activity's erratic time and space-hopping happenings.³³

Finally, Dr. J. B. Rhine himself expresses optimism for the future:

Obviously, however, the *division* between parapsychology and physics is only half of the relationship. Equally important now, and eventually more important, are the underlying interoperations that transcend this boundary between psi and the physical world. However convenient and philosophically significant it is, this division into physical and nonphysical is relative and is an artificial one so far as the natural operations are concerned.³⁴

In closing this section it is interesting to note the definition of *Parapsychology* given in the glossary of *The Journal of Parapsychology*: "A division of psychology dealing with behavioral or personal effects which do not fall within the scope of physical principles."³⁵

Causality and Knowledge

We can look upon knowledge as something other than a mere passive reception. Knowledge influences things. We normally think of "action follows being" in a normal time sequence. But action as well as being are modes (expressions) of existence. The material existent in some way is influenced by knowledge. This notion is in agreement with the opinion of the physicist Henry Margenau who asserts that not

31 G. R. Schmeidler and R. A. McConnell, *ESP and Personality Patterns*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1958, p. 3.

32 L. E. Rhine, *Hidden Channels of the Mind*, New York, William Sloane Associates, 1961, p. 113.

33 F. S. Edsall, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

34 J. B. Rhine, *New World of the Mind*, New York, William Sloane Associates, 1953, pp. 160-161.

35 A Glossary of technical terms is included in each issue of *The Journal of Parapsychology*.

only in sub-atomic physics but in every domain of experience “the act of observation has an important effect upon the observed; indeed the act of knowing has an important effect upon the known.”³⁶ Margenau’s opinion is certainly more in accord with a philosophy of idealism than one of moderate realism. His view is supported by Walker’s opinion that the *experiment* itself is a connecting link between agent and percipient in parapsychological experiments.³⁷

There is no intelligent, general theory regarding the causes at work in parapsychology. Dr. Rhine feels that any explanation must include a broader definition of such concepts as “cause” and “force” than are commonly accepted today.³⁸ Other parapsychologists question the universal application of the metaphysical principle of cause and effect: “The further science pushes away from the outermost fringes of the known, the less likely the logical principle of cause and effect is to apply.”³⁹ There seems to be a tendency to explain the ignorance of causes by saying that there may not be any causes. De Raeymaeker notes that there is a tendency of some writers to use the words *activity* and *causality* as synonymous.⁴⁰

Probably the part of parapsychology hardest to accept is psychokinesis—the causal influence of thought on a material object. *The Journal of Parapsychology* defines it as “the direct influence exerted on a physical system by a subject without any known intermediate physical energy or instrumentation.” Dr. Rhine describes psychokinesis as the extraphysical system in which the mind comes back at the physical object and exerts a very slight and erratic, but still a significant, influence on moving cubes. It is strong enough to alter their fall to an extent discoverable only by the delicate methods of statistics but reliable enough to allow for a large accumulation of confirmatory data by independent investigation.⁴¹ The moving cubes are usually dice dropped at random. The experimental subject tries to will or wish the dice to turn up in some pattern which can be correlated with mere chance expectations. Professor Vasiliev distinguishes two types of psychokinesis: (a) the influencing of a living organism at a distance and (b) the influencing of the movements of an inanimate object.⁴²

One partial explanation of psychokinesis is to say that somehow the subject has “precognition” of the events of the experiment. *The Journal of Parapsychology*

36 H. Margenau, *The Nature of Physical Reality: A Philosophy of Modern Physics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1950, p. 38.

37 Kenneth Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

38 J. B. Rhine, *New World of the Mind*, p. 162.

39 F. S. Edsall, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

40 Louis De Raeymaeker, “Being and Causality,” in *A Modern Introduction to Metaphysics*, ed. D. A. Drennen, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962, p. 406.

41 J. B. Rhine, *The Reach of the Mind*, p. 98.

42 See the book review of L. L. Vasiliev, *Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche*, in *The Journal of Parapsychology*, Durham, Vol. 28 No. 1 (March, 1964), p. 57.

defines precognition as cognition of a future event which could not be known through rational inference. The precognition theory does remove the issue from the difficult “mind over matter” dilemma, but other problems remain:

It was hard, in some cases impossible, for scientists to accept the possibility that effects might precede their causes, that mind could conceivably affect matter at a distance, or that thought patterns might form that later used the brain as a means of concretizing themselves. It went against the grain to conceive, even as an imaginative concept, that there might be ways of acquiring knowledge independent of the senses and the usual learning processes.⁴³

Those who implicitly accept the theory that parapsychological events are extrasensory believe that more controls in research are needed. Even then, a causal explanation may be beyond contemporary physical notions of causality. The way to learn the true facts about parapsychology is by carefully controlled observation and experiment, with the possibility that the explanation sought may be found only after revision of current physicalistic theory of space, time, and causality.⁴⁴ The most recent research indicates that parapsychologists are still performing card-guessing experiments on small numbers of people in isolated conditions without parallel control groups. Also there is continued emphasis upon the psychological setting.⁴⁵

An act of precognition would involve some knowledge of the future. Some type of knowledge of the future seems to be in accord with Scholastic philosophical principles.⁴⁶ The key point is that the knowledge we have of future things is involved with causes, but it may also really amount to shrewd guessing:

We can even know some future things, like eclipses or next week's blizzard; but we know these things, not in themselves, but in their causes as a man knows there is trouble in the offing from the scowl on his wife's face. As for the future things like a laugh, a sin, a yes or a no, they can only be guessed at by us at a great risk of having our guess turn out wrong. To see in themselves the future things that proceed from free causes is not the prerogative of men but of God.⁴⁷

43 F. S. Edsall, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-182.

44 C. J. Herrick, *The Evolution of Human Nature*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1956, p. 458.

45 J. B. Rhine, "Special Motivation in Some Exceptional ESP Performances," *The Journal of Parapsychology*, Durham, Vol. 28 No. 1 (March, 1964), p. 48.

46 Bernard Wuellner, S. J., *Summary of Scholastic Principles*, Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1956, p. 18 and p. 33.

47 Walter Farrell, O.P., *A Companion to the Summa*, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1941, Vol. I, p. 335.

Since knowledge itself involves a relation between the knower and the thing known, knowledge of the future merely means that in such cases the relations are much more complex—and consequently much more difficult to grasp with certainty. Probably those who perform well in parapsychological tests have an uncanny aptitude for perceiving the causal relations involved in such unusual knowledge.

This writer has attempted to present the work and criticisms of the parapsychologists from several aspects. Some difficulties of interpreting parapsychology in terms of modern mechanism and idealism have been presented and are summed up in the following text:

I critically deal with some questions of parapsychology from the point of view of natural sciences and materialist philosophy. Those American parapsychologists, who fail to understand that at present scientific questions may be interpreted in this manner only, do harm not only to us, but also to themselves. In fact, the overwhelming majority of American and British scientists will never acknowledge parapsychology as a science as long as parapsychologists tend to interpret their findings in the occultistic and idealistic spirit. ⁴⁸

In some ways, scholasticism offers a better home for parapsychology than does materialism. Scholasticism grants that there is an aspect of man which transcends mechanism and physics. The spiritual part of man transcends the laws of space and time in some respects. Scholasticism presents a milieu in which the claims of parapsychology are possible. But the parapsychologists still have the problem of proving the scientific nature of their claims.

48 L. L. Vasiliev, *Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche*, *loc. cit.*, p. 59.