

A LOOK AT ESP AND PHILOSOPHY

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While those phenomena which we now term ESP have been a part of folklore throughout history, it was only in the last century that work was done which considered ESP in a systematic fashion. Among the notable individuals in philosophy involved in this work were William James and Henry Sedgwick. In spite of this, philosophy in general has tended to ignore the possible implications of ESP on questions of philosophical interest. This may be partly due to the serious problems that arise when an attempt is made to verify the existence of ESP, so that its very existence has necessarily been considered questionable.

However, recent work at the Stanford Research Institute presents such clear verification that it seems that the time has come to consider the result of this material on philosophy. Therefore, let us: (1) examine one theory of ESP and its verification, (2) consider the SRI research in these terms, and (3) observe the effects of this theory on philosophy.

An enormous number of different entities have been proposed as examples of ESP, from telepathy to astral spirits. However, all psychic phenomena which postulate a transfer of information may be described as one of two phenomena; telepathy, precognition, or a combination of the two. Telepathy is defined as the passing of information from one mind (or possibly, brain) to another, while precognition is the obtaining of information about an event prior to its occurrence.

A little reflection will show that all other sorts of information bearing psychic phenomena may be explained by these two. For example, let us consider the phenomena of clairvoyance, the gaining of information about something previously unknown to anyone. An instance of this would be to know the suit of a card while it is lying face down. If the person supposedly clairvoyant is both telepathic and precognizant, he can gain the relevant information from the future event of an observer verifying the suit of the card. When the experimenter turns the card over, he (the experimenter) has the relevant information in his mind. The subject need only receive the information telepathically prior to the event by precognition. The minute the clairvoyant event is verified, it becomes impossible to differentiate it from a combination of telepathy and precognition. This "observer effect" is found in all ESP phenomena. Thus, information received from an "astral spirit" or "remembered from a previous life," if verified, can be explained either by precognition alone or by a combination of telepathy and precognition.

One could also explain any ESP phenomena, containing information, by clairvoyance, since this term can be so broadly defined as to be the knowing of anything. However, this definition would make an orderly discussion of ESP impossible, as it would thus be impossible to construct an experiment which could demonstrate the nature of ESP by showing when it did or did not occur. As in principle these two models can not be differentiated by any empirical test, it is preferable to choose the first in which experimentation is possible. Accepting an extreme clairvoyance model is like accepting extreme skepticism. No further progress can follow from such a theory.

This being the case, let us consider the criteria for verifying telepathy and precognition. The first insight into solving this problem was made by J. B. Rhine.¹ He recognized that as ESP is a mental function, it must be verified by the use of statistical procedures. Since mental functions appear only as the distribution about a central tendency, they can only be successfully verified by comparing the frequency of their occurrence to the frequency of chance occurrences. It thus becomes possible, by the use of the theory of probability, to determine whether an event is significant or is "an accident." However, statistical procedures can only be used with repeatable groups of events. Therefore, Rhine introduced the use of procedures such as the guessing of cards which could be repeated and thus whose chance occurrence could be calculated.

There have been a number of objections to Rhine's work. First, it is asserted that since we know that ESP does not occur, all observed examples must be frauds, errors or capable of other explanation. As this argument begs the question, we may ignore it.

We may likewise dismiss two other objections to Rhine's work. An early objection was made concerning the statistical procedures used. However, further consideration about the role of statistics in the social sciences has resulted in a situation in which ESP research could be rejected on this basis only if the results of all psychological experimentation which used the same procedures were also rejected.² The question of statistics is thus not one of ESP per se.

Second, it is objected that the experiments are deliberate frauds. With hundreds of experiments performed at numerous reputable research institutes, such objections seem to be little better than circumstantial ad hominem. In general, ESP experiments are among the most rigorously controlled experiments being performed at the present time.

Two objections, however, have substance, and it is on these points that responsible objections are based. The first is a problem well known to philosophers of mind. ESP represents what J. Smart³ has termed a 'nomological dangler.' That is, ESP can not be fitted into the models of

the universe usually accepted by science. ESP appears to be something outside of the normal physical universe and thus not capable of scientific explanation.

Second, if ESP is to be observed, the experiments must be oddly designed. Only some subjects exhibit ESP ability, the level of ESP they exhibit is only slightly above chance and any given subject's ability eventually declines, falling below chance levels. Since ESP is assumed to be some form of perception, these characteristics must be explained by any acceptable model of ESP.

An additional objection is made by philosophers, although it is generally ignored by researchers. If ESP is a perception, then the subject's ignorance as to the correctness of the data he has received requires explanation. Since perception is immediately given, it is normally impossible to have no opinion about it.

In the March 1976 *Proceedings of the IEEE*⁴ the results of research at SRI are reported which successfully meet these objections. Most of the work is on telepathy, but preliminary work into precognition is also reported. The researchers, Puthoff and Targ, began their work by meeting the first objection we mentioned, that of the need to integrate ESP into the body of science. So long as no model for ESP could be proposed, the fact of its existence would remain necessarily trivial.

Puthoff and Targ observed that ESP (excepting telekenesis) is essentially a phenomena in which information is transferred either through time or space. That being the case, it seemed that it might be examined by using the techniques of information theory, that body of theories which considers the parameters of data transmission by physical channels.

In this theory, the oddities in ESP could be explained if the actual rate of data transmission were quite low. Thus, ESP perception would be similar to the situation in which the light is so dim that visual perception is only just possible. In a dim light, those with lower visual acuity seem unable to see at all, the errors of perception are so great that the success rate is very near a chance level and in the case of subliminal perception, the subject may not be aware of having perceived the information. Likewise, fatigue of the eyes may reduce successful perception after a time.

According to information theory, if this hypothesis were correct, it should be possible to produce a success rate of virtually 100% by introducing redundancy, that is by transmitting the data several times. In terms of our analogy to dim light, if one examines an object several times in dim light the errors in visual perception can be corrected.

In two experimental designs, both mathematically impeccable and so carefully controlled as to exclude the possibility of fraud, information was transmitted psychically using the principle of redundancy and transmission

levels approaching 100% were achieved. It was shown that practically anyone can receive ESP transmitted data if enough redundancy is introduced. By the use of psychological reinforcement, the fatigue problem was essentially eliminated.

What are the implications of this for philosophy? First, let us examine the effect of telepathy on the philosophy of mind. The first notion which presents itself to us is the possibility that telepathy might provide evidence for other minds. It is generally assumed that the existence of other minds can only be induced from such indirect evidence as language and behavior.

However, this research provides stronger evidence for the existence of other minds. In information theory, the existence of a signal which conveys information necessarily requires a source for that signal.⁵ This follows from the definition of information which includes the notion of non-randomness. Therefore any information carrying signal must be non-random, i.e., ordered, and this ordering must have a point of origin or violate the second law of thermodynamics.

For example, if you answer your telephone and hear a voice conveying information, you are justified in assuming that this signal has some point of origin and is not simply the random noise (static) that the system always puts out. Likewise, you know that this point of origin must be able to modulate the channel (the telephone line) in the fashion you are observing.

It could be argued that this evidence, like that of language, does not exclude the possibility that you are observing, not a mind, but a non-mental automaton. However, as in the language argument, this first assumes that the functions of the mind and the mind itself are separate, and second, that the theoretical problems of a machine which could pass the Turing test could be overcome. To look for such automaton seems unnecessarily complex.

Most important, however, in strengthening the evidence for other minds is the fact that ESP, unlike language or behavior, is directly observed and not dependent on induction. One does not infer that there is a mind from similar behavior, but rather by a direct transfer of information. Nevertheless, this material fails to justify any assertions about other minds beyond their ability to process and transfer information. No particular mind-body position can be justified on the basis of this research. There is no proof of any mental substance or force. Nothing for or against a mind-body identity or an epiphenomenal consciousness is suggested. In short, nothing about the nature of mind may be demonstrated from this model of telepathy. This research simply provides perceptual evidence for the existence of other minds, making them in principle objects of perception like any other objects of perception. The more interesting questions in the philosophy of mind are not affected. This is hardly surprising since it has been

recognized that empirical data would be unlikely to resolve modern problems on the nature of mind.⁶

Verification of precognition would seem to have a more serious effect on philosophy. It should be kept in mind that the work on precognition is not yet complete and difficulties may arise. However, Puthoff and Targ feel that precognition will be as satisfactorily verified as telepathy has been. Therefore, let us consider what this means to philosophy. It is immediately clear that the significance of precognition relates to the problems of causality. However, the effect would not be as profound as might be expected. Precognition, in this model, is only the gaining of information about an event prior to its occurrence. There is no suggestion of time reversal for physical causes. Philosophy has already encountered problems in dealing with the role of information in causal structure. For example, it is difficult to deal causally with the effect of information about purposes and goals in the mind of a subject. Likewise, the role of inductions about the future effecting that future are a difficulty for theories of causality. Thus precognition, when it is seen as concerning information, simply adds an additional aspect to the problems of dealing with any information system causally.

In summation, the effects of the SRI research do not require the alteration of any major view of philosophy. We have seen that this work limits the verifiable information carrying ESP phenomena to telepathy and precognition. We have seen that it provides evidence for the existence of other minds as direct objects of perception, but provides no proof for or against any theory as to the nature of mind. Last, it makes the problems of dealing causally with any situation in which the information known to a subject plays a part, more serious. These effects are interesting and warrant further considerations, but the sweeping demonstrations of mental phenomena which have sometimes been predicted to follow from proof of the existence of ESP have not materialized.

NOTES

¹J. B. Rhine. "PSI and Psychology: Conflict and Solution" and "The Establishment of Basic Concepts and Terminology in Parapsychology" in *Psychology and Extrasensory Perception*. Edited by Raymond Van Over (New York: New American Library, 1972).

²C. W. K. Mundle. "Philosophical Implications of ESP Phenomena," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967), Vol. 3, pp. 49-58.

³J. J. C. Smart. "Sensations and Brain Processes" in *Modern Materialism: Readings on Mind-Body Identity*. Edited by John O'Connor (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969).

⁴Harold E. Puthoff and Russell Targ. "A Perceptual Channel for Information Transfer over Kilometer Distances: Historical Perspective and Recent Research," *Proceedings of the IEEE*. Vol. 64, No. 3 (March 1976) pp. 329-354.

⁵Norman Abramson, *Information Theory and Coding* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), pp.11-19.

⁶Jaegwon Kim, "On the Psycho-Physical Identity Theory," O'Connor, op. cit.

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