# Philosophy and Psychical Research

Shivesh C. Thakur



# PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH



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## EDITED BY SHIVESH C THAKUR



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Philosophy and Psychical Research ISBN 0-415-29620-X Philosophy of Mind and Psychology: 17 Volumes ISBN 0-415-29533-5 Muirhead Library of Philosophy: 95 Volumes ISBN 0-415-27897-X An admirable statement of the aims of the Library of Philosophy was provided by the first editor, the late Professor J. H. Muirhead, in his description of the original programme printed in Erdmann's *History of Philosophy* under the date 1890. This was slightly modified in subsequent volumes to take the form of the following statement:

'The Muirhead Library of Philosophy was designed as a contribution to the History of Modern Philosophy under the heads : first of Different Schools of Thought—Sensationalist, Realist, Idealist, Intuitivist; secondly of different Subjects—Psychology, Ethics, Aesthetics, Political Philosophy, Theology. While much had been done in England in tracing the course of evolution in nature, history, economics, morals and religion, little had been done in tracing the development of thought on these subjects. Yet the "evolution of opinion is part of the whole evolution".

'By the cooperation of different writers in carrying out this plan it was hoped that a thoroughness and completeness of treatment, otherwise unattainable, might be secured. It was believed also that from writers mainly British and American fuller consideration of English Philosophy than it had hitherto received might be looked for. In the earlier series of books containing, among others, Bosanquet's History of Aesthetics, Pfleiderer's Rational Theology since Kant, Albee's History of English Utilitarianism, Bonar's Philosophy and Political Economy, Brett's History of Psychology, Ritchie's Natural Rights, these objects were to a large extent effected.

'In the meantime original work of a high order was being produced both in England and America by such writers as Bradley, Stout, Bertrand Russell, Baldwin, Urban, Montague, and others, and a new interest in foreign works, German, French and Italian, which had either become classical or were attracting public attention, had developed. The scope of the Library thus became extended into something more international, and it is entering on the fifth decade of its existence in the hope that it may contribute to that mutual understanding between countries which is so pressing a need of the present time.'

The need which Professor Muirhead stressed is no less pressing

today, and few will deny that philosophy has much to do with enabling us to meet it, although no one, least of all Muirhead himself, would regard that as the sole, or even the main, object of philosophy. As Professor Muirhead continues to lend the distinction of his name to the Library of Philosophy it seemed not inappropriate to allow him to recall us to these aims in his own words. The emphasis on the history of thought also seemed to me very timely: and the number of important works promised for the Library in the very near future augur well for the continued fulfilment, in this and other ways, of the expectations of the original editor.

H. D. LEWIS

# PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

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### PREFACE

There are those—not necessarily psychical researchers themselves —who believe that psychical research is already an established, though young, scientific discipline. Many are sceptical. Whichever opinion is correct, there is little doubt that the claims of psychical research seem, *prima facie*, to have implications for certain important philosophical issues and concepts. Understandably, philosophers—of widely differing persuasions—have been interested in psychical research. But the full extent of this interest has not generally been known either to professional philosophers or to psychical researchers. This volume is intended, partly at least, to set the record straight.

A number of well-known philosophers were invited to write on whichever philosophical issue relating to psychical research interested them most. This volume is a collection of essays that were received in response. There are many philosophers who would have been happy to write but were unable to do so—mostly due to other commitments. It is hoped that the essays that appear here will serve to show not only the extent of interest in psychical research on the part of professional philosophers but also the reasons for such interest. If the volume succeeds in creating some new interest in the subject, it will have achieved all its aims.

The first essay is by a psychologist, and was intended—partly at least—to serve as an introduction, which, it was felt, might help readers not already familiar with the field of psychical research. Consequently, this essay appears first. The rest of them appear under the names of their authors, in alphabetical order.

I am grateful to all the contributors to the volume for their positive response. My special thanks are due to Professor H. D. Lewis for his constant help and encouragement; to Dr D. M. A. Leggett, Vice-Chancellor, University of Surrey, whose abiding passion for psychical research was instrumental in my acquiring a major interest in the subject; to George Allen & Unwin for agreeing to publish the volume; to my secretary, Mrs L. M. Ball,

#### PREFACE

for retyping some of the material and duplicating all of it; and to my wife, Philippa, for helping with the correction of the proofs.

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14

## CONTENTS

Prei	face pag	ge 13
1.	ESP AND ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN IT Alan Gauld Lecturer in Psychology, University of Nottingham	17
2.	THE METAPHYSICS OF PRECOGNITION Bob Brier Associate Professor of Philosophy, CW. Post Centre, Long Island University	46
3.	ESP AND THE MATERIALIST THEORY OF MIND David E. Cooper Reader in Philosophy, University of Surrey	59
4.	THE SOURCES OF SERIALISM Antony Flew Professor of Philosophy, University of Reading	81
5.	RELIGION AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH Jonathan Harrison Professor of Philosophy, University of Nottingham	97
6.	SOME ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM OF SURVIVAL Pamela M. Huby Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Liver- pool	122
7.	RELIGION AND THE PARANORMAL Hywel D. Lewis Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion King's College, University of London	142
8.	ON THE 'PSYCHIC' POWERS OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS C. W. K. Mundle Professor of Philosophy, University College of North Wales, Bangor.	157

#### CONTENTS

9.	EXPLANATIONS OF THE SUPERNATURAL Michael Scriven	page	181
	Professor of Philosophy, University of Califor Berkeley	nia,	
10.	TELEPATHY, EVOLUTION AND DUALISM Shivesh C. Thakur Professor of Philosophy, University of Surrey		195
Ind	ex		211

16

# ESP AND ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN IT

#### by

### ALAN GAULD

'... the Devil hath great power in ruling that which they call Chance.'

Richard Baxter, Certainty of the World of Spirits (1691)

It will be convenient to begin with some definitions offered by Mundle (1967). ESP, or extrasensory perception, is 'the acquisition of information without the use of any human sense organs'. The main subspecies of ESP are *telepathy*, in which 'the information originates from the mind of another person', *clairvoyance*, in which 'the information originates from physical objects', and *precognition*, in which 'the information is about *and originates from* future events'. We may also note the terms *retrocognition*—ESP in which the information is about and originates from past events, and *psychokinesis* (PK)—the direct influence of mental events on physical events external to the agent's body. These definitions are, as Mundle points out, not altogether satisfactory; but for immediate purposes they will suffice.

The evidence for ESP may be divided into the anccdotal and the experimental (a recent review is Thouless, 1972). We have on the one hand a large number of apparently authentic reports of the unsought, 'spontaneous' occurrence of ESP in the shape of premonitions, hunches, telepathic dreams, overpowering emotional upsurges, irresistible impulses to action, persistent vivid images, and actual hallucinations of persons, voices or distant scenes; and on the other hand increasingly numerous attempts to demonstrate comparable, though usually much less exciting, phenomena by properly designed laboratory experiments. Somewhere between anecdote and experiment come investigations of ESP apparently exhibited in such phenomena as automatic writing, automatic speaking and crystal visions.

The earliest large-scale attempts to collect and classify firsthand reports of spontaneously occurring ESP were those made towards the end of the last century by certain leading members of the British Society for Psychical Research (the SPR). In 1886, four vears after the SPR was founded, it published the monumental two-volumed Phantasms of the Living by Edmund Gurney, F. W. H. Myers and F. Podmore. Gurney, the principal author, was a man of exceptional abilities, and his classification of cases and discussion of the psychology of testimony in regard to unusual events have remained classics in the field. These early writers would probably have felt that the anecdotal evidence alone was sufficient to establish that ESP occurs. This is an arguable point of view. Modern parapsychologists, however, have tended to follow modern psychologists in their (perhaps excessive) respect for laboratory experiments, and many of them would regard collections of spontaneous cases as of value chiefly in suggesting hypotheses which can be subjected to more stringent investigation in the laboratory (e.g. Thouless, 1972, p. 16).

For many years laboratory experimentation on ESP was popularly equated with the card-guessing techniques pioneered by Professor J. B. Rhine of Duke University in the early 1930s, and brought to their highest pitch of statistical success by Dr S. G. Soal in the early 1940s. Work in this tradition is still carried out, but of late it has been partly overshadowed by experiments utilising electronic machinery for the presentation and randomisation of target sequences and for the recording of subjects' guesses. Extremely influential here have been some experiments on precognition by Schmidt (1969). Schmidt used small numbers of subjects whom there was some antecedent reason for regarding as possibly 'gifted'. The targets were four electric lamps of different colours. The subjects' task was to indicate, by pressing the appropriate button, which lamp they thought would light next. Which lamp in fact lit was determined by the closure of an electronic switch which designated each lamp in turn a quarter of a million times every second. Between the pressing of the button and the closure of the switch there was a delay of about one tenth of a second. The precise length of this delay was determined by the decay of a piece of radio-active strontium 90, a process which, as far as is known, is quite random. The output sequences of this machine were extensively tested for 'randomness'. In one series of experiments three subjects made between them 63,066 guesses. 'Hits' exceeded chance expectation by just over 690 (odds greater than 500 million to 1). In another series of 20,000 guesses, four subjects were asked to pick a lamp which would *not* light. Their success was so great that the odds against its being due to chance exceeded 10 thousand million to 1.

Schmidt and others have subsequently carried out similar experiments. Using eleven subjects who did not claim to be gifted, and Schmidt's machine, Haraldson (1970) obtained odds of 2,000 to 1 against chance. Targ and Hunt (1971) with a machine of their own design which incorporated various devices for encouraging successful subjects, claimed that three out of twenty subjects tested for clairvoyance showed significant 'learning' over several hundred to several thousand guesses. One of the three, a girl of 10, scored so highly in her later trials that her overall mean score per run for 64 runs of 24 guesses was 8.6 where 6 was expected (odds against chance greater than 10<sup>15</sup> to 1). Kelly and Kanthamami (1972) utilised Schmidt's machine in the course of testing a somewhat volatile subject who claimed to have had remarkable 'spontaneous' ESP experiences. In a run of 508 trials he made 180 hits (odds against chance in excess of 10 million to 1). In an informal series of 329 trials he played the machine with the target lamps off (misses produced a single click, hits a double click). His score of 163 exceeded chance by greatly over 10 thousand million to 1. A punched tape was then connected to the machine to record guesses and hits trial by trial. This disturbed the subject, whose scores (with lamps restored) declined markedly. However, he determined to beat the machine. and over the whole series of 5,377 trials he made 1,542 hits (odds against chance greater than a thousand million to 1). Bierman and Camastra (1973) have devised an automated procedure for

classroom ESP testing. They tested 1,402 pupils from twelve schools, and obtained a mean score of 16.034 per run where chance expectation was 15 (odds against chance in excess of  $10^{30}$  to 1).

Automation would seem to have been carried to its limit in certain ESP experiments with animals. The first of these experiments was published pseudonymously by two French biologists (Duval and Montredon, 1968). They used a specially designed cage divided into two compartments by a low hurdle. The floor of the cage was an electric grid through which a mild shock could be delivered to the animal inside. Mice were placed in the cage, which was alone in the experimental room, one at a time. Before each trial the cage was illuminated and the position of the mouse was recorded by means of a system of photoelectric cells. If the mouse was in that half of the cage selected by a multivibrator in another room, it received a shock. The mouse's task was thus on each trial to avoid that half of the cage which was about to be shocked. Four mice were given twenty-five runs of from 100 to 140 trials, each run being electronically controlled. On the majority of trials the animals showed 'static' or 'mechanical' behaviour-they remained in the side of the cage which had proved safe on the previous trial, and, if they received a shock, jumped into the other half of the cage. Occasionally they showed what the experimenters called 'random' behaviour-they moved out of the previously safe side. Out of the 612 trials on which 'random' behaviour took place, the mice avoided the shock 359 times (odds against chance greater than 1,000 to 1). These findings have supposedly been confirmed in the United States and in Holland by about a dozen published experiments using small rodents as subjects, but a certain doubt now hangs over a number of these.

For the purposes of this paper I shall assume that the evidence for ESP is satisfactory. The brief account of it given above is more an attempt to characterise the present state of play than to soften the unconvinced. Indeed, there are those among the unconvinced who would take a good deal of softening. This may in part be because some of those who believe in ESP have suggested that its occurence forces various philosophical conclusions upon us. For example Price (1949, p. 109) has said, 'There is no room for telepathy in a Materialistic universe'. I shall shortly consider certain attempts to show that ESP can only be explained or understood in ways which force upon us particular philosophical positions or frameworks of thought. But before doing so, I shall very briefly outline some of the empirical findings (or alleged findings) which might be thought likely to have relevance to the theoretical explanations of ESP. This can conveniently be done under three headings, as follows :

(a) An obvious preliminary question to ask is this: Is there any need to look for different or differing explanations of telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition? It might be the case, for example, that the findings which have hitherto been regarded as evidence for telepathy can be shown on further investigation to be instances of clairvoyance. Many early experimenters took it for granted that if an 'agent' in one room concentrated upon, say, a drawing, and a 'percipient' in the next room successfully reproduced that drawing, then mind had contacted mind directly. But of course if clairvoyance be a fact, the percipient might have obtained his information about the drawing clairvoyantly, in which case the agent's concentration would have been so much wasted effort. To decide between these possibilities it is only necessary to set up experiments in which the 'targets' remain in the mind of the agent until after the percipient has made his guess, and experiments in which the targets remain unknown to anyone until after the percipient has made his guesses. The first person to conduct such experiments systematically was I. B. Rhine, and significant results were obtained under both telepathic and clairvoyant conditions.

The problems become much more complex, however, if we admit, as we must, that the evidence for precognition is at least as strong as the evidence for telepathy and for clairvoyance. If precognition is a possibility, then successful subjects in 'telepathy' experiments may obtain their results by precognitive clairvoyance of the written record which the experimenter makes *after* the agent has guessed; and successful subjects in 'clairvoyance' experiments may obtain their results by precognitive telepathy with the mind of the experimenter as he inspects the target sequences after the experiment. To design 'pure' telepathy or 'pure' clairvoyance experiments is rather tricky, but such experiments have been designed and positive results claimed in them (see Mundle, op. cit., for a detailed review of the problem). Pure clairvoyance is in principle demonstrated if a subject can score above chance on a machine which presents targets in a random sequence, provided that the targets are not visible to or inferable by the experimenter or anyone else, and provided that the machine records only the number of hits, i.e. not the target or guess sequences. Pure telepathy is in principle demonstrated if, by means of a purely private code, the 'agent' can link targets held 'in the mind' to the digit sequences of a series of random numbers, provided that no public record is made detailing which of the percipient's guesses were correct and which not, and only the total number of correct guesses per run is actually set down.

On the face of it, therefore, we have evidence both for pure telepathy and for pure clairvoyance. The following two qualifications must, however, be made. Firstly, someone might suggest that all cases of ostensible telepathy can be written off as examples of the clairvoyant apprehension of another person's brain-state; this view would no doubt be supported by philosophical and physiological considerations. But it leaves open at least as many problems as it solves. Ordinary clairvoyance (if one may speak of it like that) tends to be of the macroscopic properties of commonplace physical objects; 'telepathic' clairvoyance (to coin a phrase) would have to be of the microscopic and possibly subatomic properties of brains, and would require the percipient to have an infinitely greater ability to interpret and understand such properties than any neurologist of this century (and probably the next few centuries too). Furthermore, it is, as we shall see, even harder to conceive of a physical explanation for clairvovance than it is to imagine one for telepathy.

Secondly, it might be proposed that precognition itself can be understood in terms of telepathic or clairvoyant cognition of contemporary states of affairs from which the precognised event can be predicted. This would require percipients to possess, presumably unawares, powers of prediction vastly in excess of those of the most able mathematical physicists; and besides that, in the experiments of Schmidt (1969) mentioned above, one of the factors influencing the determination of the target was the decay of a piece of a radioactive substance, a process unpredictable in the requisite detail.

A final possibility which should be mentioned is that successful results in telepathy and precognition experiments may be due to PK on the part of the subjects. It has, for instance, been proposed that telepathy may be due to the agent's causing the firing of 'critically poised' neurons in the percipient's brain. But this seems once again to require that agents must possess unawares a vastly greater knowledge of brain function than any neurophysiologist, and in addition raises the question of how, other than by clairvoyance, the agent is able to locate the 'critically poised' neurons which, with a particular target and a particular percipient, it is appropriate for him to influence. In the case of the more striking 'spontaneous' precognitions, the idea that agents bring about the fulfilment of their 'precognitions' by psychokinesis must surely be dismissed as preposterous. It would involve us in saving that such events as the sinking of the *Titanic* were brought about by the monitory dreams of those who foresaw the disaster. In the case of certain small-scale laboratory experiments on 'precognition' the idea is not so preposterous-indeed there were some indications that one of Schmidt's successful subjects may have achieved his results in this way. Schmidt and Pantas (1972) investigated the possibility further in a highly ingenious experiment. Schmidt's original precognition machine was altered in such a way that by the flip of a switch it could, unknown to the subject, be changed into a machine on which they could only get results by PK. When the subject pressed a button to indicate a guess, and the randon number generator produced a 1, 2, 3, or 4, the 1, 2, 3, or 0 lamp position to the right was lit. Thus subjects could only score above chance by 'forcing' the machine to generate 4s. Fairly significant above chance scores were in fact obtained under both conditions.

The upshot of this involved discussion seems to be that, of the subspecies of ESP cited at the beginning, only retrocognition can perhaps be interpreted in terms of the others and thus eliminated. For if any supposed example of retrocognition is to be confirmed, the information which will verify it must exist *now*, and must accordingly be in principle accessible to telepathy or to clairvoyance. (Perhaps, however, a retrocognitive vision of such an

object as Fermat's proof of his last theorem might turn out to be self-verifying.) Despite this obstinate refusal of the various subspecies of ESP to be eliminated, it is very commonly supposed that they are at root manifestations of the same underlying process. The reasons why this is maintained appear to be: that persons who seem to possess one of the kinds of ESP commonly also exhibit the others; that the ways in which the various subspecies of ESP spontaneously manifest themselves (in symbols, in phenomena which intrude on the normal course of consciousness, and so on) are pretty much the same, and so are the matters to which they relate; that conditions which favour or hinder one kind of ESP commonly also favour or hinder the others; and that in some spontaneous cases there are features suggestive of the conjoint working of telepathy and clairvoyance.

These considerations do not seem to me to go very far towards establishing the desired conclusion. For if it be true (and it is, as we shall shortly see, commonly alleged) that information acquired by ESP is usually, as it were, detained in and processed by some unconscious level of the personality before finding its way into consciousness, then the similarities in form of manifestation, and in the conditions favourable to manifestation, can readily be explained without supposing that the underlying process of ESP is in each instance the same. In fact, the ways in which ESP manifests itself show certain similarities to the ways in which subliminal perceptions of an ordinary kind, and also long-forgotten memories, may find expression (Beloff, 1972; cf. Dixon, 1971). And so if someone produces a theoretical explanation of ESP which, for instance, covers telepathy but not clairvoyance, we should not (as some have tended to do) on that account reject it. Rather we should be thankful for even a partial illumination of this obscure field.

(b) Many of the persons who have studied the evidence for ESP have been led to the same conclusion about the underlying process (or processes), namely that it affects in the first place some unconscious or subliminal level of the personality, and thence may burst into consciousness, or filter through to consciousness in some disguised form, or that it may indeed express itself independently of consciousness in the shape of some motor automatism or even psychokinetic phenomenon. The reasons why this

conclusion has so often appeared compelling seem to be these. Firstly, many of the phenomena in which ESP is characteristically manifested are, as regards the subject's ordinary stream of consciousness, alien, intrusive and uncontrollable. One might instance automatic writing, veridical hallucinations, and 'true' dreams. And it is worth noting that the guesses of successful subjects in laboratory ESP experiments-their card calls, button presses etc.--tend to be automatic rather than to be based upon inner images or intuitions. Secondly, the phenomena in which ESP is characteristically manifested are often ones which are regarded for other reasons as expressing levels of intelligent functioning not ordinarily accessible to consciousness. Here again one might instance automatic writing and dreams. Thirdly, the phenomena by which ESP is characteristically manifested not infrequently have a symbolic quality. Although ESP may take the form of a subject's simply 'knowing' that, for instance, someone has died, and this feeling may not be occasioned by or involve any vivid mental picture, hallucinatory voice calling, or what have you, the information concerned often seems to percolate into consciousness less directly, in the form of inexplicable anxiety, a persistent image, a straightforward dream or hallucination, an obviously symbolic dream or hallucination, or indeed a whole dramatic representation. Thus-and here I am citing actual cases-percipients of 'crisis apparitions' (hallucinations representing some person who is, unexpectedly, at the point of death) may see the phantasms as accompanied by a hearse, as accompanied by Jesus Christ, or as floating up into the sky like Mary Poppins. Now psychopathologists have often suggested that material from the unconscious mind can find its way into the conscious mind only in some disguised and symbolic form; correspondingly, when material which looks as though it may have some symbolic meaning breaks into consciousness, we may suspect that it has emerged from the unconscious.

(c) By far the largest amount of recent experimental work on ESP has been expended in attempts to find conditions or situations which will favour the emergence of ESP, and to discover the personality characteristics of successful subjects. Hypnosis, drugs, meditational techniques, standard personality tests, electroence-phalography, biofeedback, emotion-generating experimental