AWKWARD QUESTIONS[1]

by DONALD WEST

Faced with the accumulation of historical evidence that paranormal phenomena occur, it is often asserted that sheer prejudice accounts for the scientific establishment's continuing scepticism and neglect. However, awkward questions persist, providing fuel for sceptics and impeding access to the more generous funds available for less important areas of scientific inquiry. In this article I shall consider those awkward questions and speculate on how they might be answered.

Why does the size of the paranormal effects found in experiments appear to have seriously declined?

Sceptics attribute this to improved methodology and the elimination of many of the errors of the past, but this is hard to reconcile with historical records. The earliest experiments in the transmission of the content of pictures by 'telepathy' were marred by the absence of systematic randomisation of targets and of the quantitative evaluation of coincidences. Nevertheless, the hits obtained were sometimes so remarkable and persistent that coincidence seemed ruled out by mere inspection. The experiments of the author Upton Sinclair (1930) provide an example. One may compare this with the elaborate statistics needed by Whately Carington (1940) before claiming significant results in the paranormal cognition of drawings, or the resort to meta-analysis to establish a significant transmission of information in Ganzfeld experiments (Bem & Honorton, 1994; Storm, Tressoldi & Di Risio, 2010).

The Rhine revolution, introducing forced-choice guessing of five card symbols and straightforward statistics, produced many substantial deviations from chance expectation in group testing and very high scoring under convincing conditions by a few special subjects. Sceptics argue that this pioneer work was flawed by lack of precaution against sensory leakage and/or fraud. Yet the book, *Extrasensory Perception After Sixty Years* (Pratt, Rhine, Smith, Stuart & Greenwood, 1940), summarising the research at Duke University, rebuffed such criticism. The authors could claim (p.243), with justification, that "ESP occurs", although they admitted that there was much left to discover about it.

Since then, simple card-guessing has gone out of fashion as experimenters at Duke and elsewhere failed increasingly often in attempts to reproduce the early successes (Palmer, 1978). With the proliferation of personal computers and relevant software it has become easy to test forced-choice guessing ability under secure automated conditions, working alone at home and/or on-line in collaboration with parapsychological experimenters. In comparison with times past, the absence of reported success is remarkable.

The issue is crucial, for either the earlier work was indeed fatally flawed, which I find hard to countenance, or there has been an unexplained retreat in the way psi manifests.

[1] This article is based on a paper read to the 36th SPR Conference, at the University of Northampton in September 2012.

Why have consistently-high-scoring subjects in psi experimentation become so rare?

Some frauds have been exposed, sadly including the most famous British experimenter of his day, S. G. Soal (Markwick, 1978; Markwick & West, in press). University researchers now avoid people who claim exceptional powers, perhaps for fear of attracting suspicion or unwanted publicity (see, for example, the infamous Project Alpha case: Thalbourne, 1995), especially since high scoring has been linked to particular experimenters rather than particular subjects (Palmer, 1997; Schmeidler, 1997). Rupert Sheldrake is exceptional in reporting a relatively large effect size in at least some of his tests (Sheldrake, 2004). It is sad that, although he has collaborated with the sceptic Chris French, no joint experiment by them has yet been reported, on the lines of that conducted by Wiseman and Schlitz (1997), to find out whether star performance is tied to the experimenter. The situation is unfortunate, as high-scoring subjects can provide convincing data more quickly than those who require prolonged experimentation before statistical significance is finally achieved. If any high-scoring subjects do appear they should be utilised to the full. The remarkable performances of the boy cousins featured in Soal's book, *The Mind Readers* (Soal & Bowden, 1959), could have proved a boon to science if only more rigorous methods of testing had been applied during the time they were active.

Why are secondary effects, such as displacement, non-random positioning of hits in runs of guesses, and alternating positive and negative scoring, once prominent in psi research, rarely featured in experimental reports today?

Sceptics suggest that such effects are artefacts, resulting from illegitimate use of multiple statistical goals: 'if a straightforward test gives a negative result, try different ones until something shows up'. It could be that the effects still occur, but as experimenters' interests have changed they no longer look for them, or perhaps they are created only if experimenters decide in advance to look for them. It is unfortunate that the most persistent of secondary effects is a decline as research continues (Colborn, 2007).

Why is there no agreement about what factors are needed for psi to manifest?

A host of methods have been tried for encouraging psi in experiments: for example, rewards, emotional targets, hypnotism, majority-vote scoring, counting only guesses accompanied by a feeling of confidence, deceiving subjects into believing in an enhanced level of chance expectation, or testing at favourable points of sidereal or geomagnetic environment. Sceptics regard this muddle as confirmation that parapsychologists' data are meaningless statistical or methodological artefacts. Unfortunately, hypotheses such as the sidereal time connection (Spottiswoode, 1997), or extensions of subliminal perception, or the presentiment phenomenon (Radin, 1997), are liable to go out of fashion before they are pursued thoroughly enough for it to be shown that they really work.

Why do the statistical effects found in psi experiments not make an appearance in other contexts, such as in the statistics of gambling or in scientific research using blind judgements as control measures?

Perhaps they do occur, but are too small either to be noticed or for them to

produce a flood of millionaire gamblers. One *ad hoc* theory is that psi works in experiments only when the subject's intention is casual. In real life, pressures of need or greed are arguably inhibiting.

Are the macro-PK effects reported in real-life situations, poltergeists and séance-room phenomena, an extension of the micro-PK found in laboratory tests?

The latter appear with dynamic systems of indeterminate outcome, such as dice-casting, or random event generators (Broughton, 1991). Efforts to obtain movement of static systems, such as delicately poised balances, that were much in evidence in early researches, have met with consistent failure or have come up against natural explanations in terms of air currents and temperature effects. It could well be that experimental PK effects do not actually involve any tangible force.

Among the pundits during the SPR's early years there was scepticism about the reality of the gross physical effects at séances or in poltergeist outbreaks (Inglis, 1986, pp. 96–97). Certainly there have been many exposures of blatant fraud. However, setting aside both this and the mind-boggling nature of the happenings, examination of some of the records of earlier investigators of, for example, Palladino (Alvarado, 1993) and Eva C (Schrenck-Notzing, 1923), makes it difficult to dismiss the observations of so many competent investigators. However, now that techniques of unobtrusive, automated recording are available, objective investigations by competent scientists of séance-room effects seem to have come to a halt.

The Scole Report (Keen, Ellison & Fontana, 1999), an attempt by three distinguished modern investigators to obtain scientific confirmation of physical paranormality, was sadly lacking both in the familiar controls of the past—searches and immobilisation of the mediums—and in modern controls, such as infra-red photography. I think it a tragedy that a simple and convincing test, namely the imprinting of photographic images within a closed box, was ordered by the Scole 'spirits' to be discontinued after the box was found to be insecure and before a repetition with the flaw remedied could be carried out.

Why are reports of investigations of 'communications' via mediums, as thorough as was the work with Mrs Piper and others a century ago, absent from current SPR publications?

This is regrettable, the more so since modern methods of objective statistical evaluation allow more analytic and potentially more informative research. Televised dramatic demonstrations of apparent psi by professional psychics suggest that clear demonstration of psi is attainable. Given funding adequate to secure their co-operation, controlled research with these performers could be rewarding.

In recent years there have been a number of investigations, for example by Roy and Robertson (Robertson & Roy, 2001; Roy & Robertson, 2001, 2004), to test whether mediums can produce information when their clients, of unknown identity, are not present, and when the applicability of the medium's statements is scored blindly by clients who do not know which of these were intended for them. Recent research of this kind has sometimes yielded negative outcomes, and when results have been positive the effect sizes have been smaller than

might be expected from reports of remarkable success under conditions less formally controlled.

It is an assumption that the psi process should still work when the link between client and medium is tenuous. However, a good result obtained in such research has been published by Emily Kelly (Kelly & Arcangel, 2011). Clients wanting to contact deceased persons blindly assessed readings intended for them, along with four control readings meant for other people. Sum-of-ranks scoring showed a highly significant tendency for the correct reading to be ranked higher than the controls. However, in this successful project a link was made by giving the mediums photographs of the clients. Despite the precaution that they were all of the same age and gender, it could be argued that subtle clues could have been gleaned from the photos. It would have been better to have provided a link by means of similar neutral token objects, randomly allocated and carried around by clients for some time prior to the experiment (see, for example, Parra & Argibay, 2007). Kelly's research points the way not only towards verification of the paranormal element, but also towards obtaining data relevant to the source of the 'communications'.

Why have reports of thoroughly investigated cases of spontaneously occurring psi experiences become infrequent in present-day publications?

Certainly not because they no longer occur, since questionnaire surveys show them to be as common as ever, modern surveys (Tien, 1991) revealing a prevalence of apparitions in the normal population strikingly similar to that found in the first SPR survey (Sidgwick et al., 1894). By their very nature, conclusive corroboration of accounts of subjective experiences is often impossible to obtain. Few people bother to write down a description of a vision or an impression before it is known whether subsequent events confirm its veracity. Even if this is done, the impression is often insufficiently precise to rule out coincidence as a plausible explanation. The perfect case may be unattainable, but it is surely worthwhile to collect and analyse cases that come close to this.

Psychical researchers have long been well aware of the need to guard against self-deception and exaggeration in reports of emotional experiences, and of the probability that many are easily explained without invoking the paranormal (e.g. Holt, Simmonds-Moore, Luke & French, 2012). There has been a proliferation of investigations purporting to show that persons who report psychic experiences have an above-average vulnerability to distortions of perception and memory. This reinforces the need for corroboration. There are, however, published cases of clear, detailed impressions perhaps unique in the percipient's lifetime, and with respectable corroboration, such that only gross delusion or dishonesty, rather than a normal variation in perceptual competence, would suffice to explain them away. That so many published cases refer to events of the distant past invites scepticism and points to the need for further effort to secure more and better examples.

Why has parapsychology not become an accepted science?

Over the years successive teams of researchers, seeking repeatable and even useful effects, have initially obtained very promising results, but these have ultimately proved unsustainable, as happened at Rhine's Parapsychology

Laboratory. The American Stargate Project, exploring remote viewing as a tool for spying during the cold war, came to an end when funding was no longer thought justified (May, 1996; Utts, 1995). The PEAR group at Princeton University, after years of remarkable and consistent results, was disbanded without either achieving a strictly repeatable protocol or finding any practical application (Jahn & Dunne, 1987). The determined efforts of Chris Roe and his colleagues at Northampton University have not as yet achieved a result repeatable on demand. Dramatic experiments of the distant past, such as the psychic production of apparitions perceived by distant percipients (Ochorowicz, 1891, pp.44ff.) seem to have been abandoned.

As for paranormal events outside the laboratory, there has been no lessening of purported incidents, despite the decline in critically investigated and published cases. Among anomalous personal experiences, independent confirmation, even when this would have been possible, is rarely sought or obtained. Crisis apparitions, arguably among the most evidential, have become a rarity. Among paranormal physical effects, slate-writing disappeared long ago, home-produced metal-bending and crop circles are out of fashion, Ted Serios's Polaroid images were a one-off novelty (Braude, 2007), poltergeists continue to avoid cameras, and séance-room levitations, apports and materialisations are not now made available for critical investigation (Houran & Lange, 2001).

Given this history, it is scarcely surprising that scientists are sceptical or that members of the psychical research community do not agree about which phenomena are real and deserving of investment in further research. For political reasons it is right that the SPR should express no corporate opinion, but it might be useful to rank the phenomena according to the strength of the evidential support. To lump together so many different topics under the labels 'psi' or 'paranormal', implying a common causation, could well be a mistake.

Perhaps elusiveness and changeability are intrinsic characteristics of the paranormal. Whatever the future of psychical research may be, I am convinced that there are real mysteries to be solved. I hope they will not prove for ever unfathomable.

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