Thoughtforms

The term 'thoughtform' describes the concept of an entity created directly and exclusively by the mind, whether unconsciously or consciously, which appears to develop a life of its own, as an independent agent in the real world, perceptible to other people. The belief in thoughtforms is the basis of several related concepts: *tulpa* in Tibet, *pooka* in Germanic and Celtic cultures, and *jinn* or *djinn* in Arabic cultures. It is found in the works of Shakespeare: the character Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* originates from the Germanic-Celtic pooka. Thoughtforms are an integral part of theosophical beliefs. There are also records of Western explorers experiencing an externalized form of consciousness as benign beings who accompany them and in some cases befriend them. More recently, poltergeist and demonic phenomena have been attributed to thoughtforms.[1]

The concept of thoughtforms carries obvious implications for the understanding of consciousness and psi phenomena, yet to date there has been no experimental research in this area. If consciousness has the ability to divide and extend itself, this provides a context for understanding many reported psi phenomena, notably apparitional appearances and the entities encountered in mediumship and poltergeists episodes.

Cross-cultural Background

Tulpa

The idea of thoughtform, as belief and also as experience, is found in the *tulpa* of Tibetan Bön and Buddhism. Lama Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, writing about the Tibetan Bön tradition, remarks that the mind works like clicking on an icon on the computer screen. In the dream world we come to manifest our multiple selves, from where 'we can divide into different, simultaneously existing dream bodies … The only boundaries in a dream are the boundaries of your imagination.'[2] In Tibetan Bön and Buddhism, tulpas are created unconsciously or consciously, manifesting their individual identity via an emanation called *sprul pa*.[3] Tulpas are not regarded as unreal but rather as belonging to different levels of reality to the one that humans habitually experience.

Alexandra David-Néel popularized the notion of the tulpa in her 1932 book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. While travelling in the Himalayas she claimed to have herself intentionally produced a tulpa in the form of a short, fat, jolly monk, which her companions also began to see. In her account, the tulpa developed its own will, became malevolent, and was more difficult to get rid off than to produce.[4]

Walter Evan-Wentz developed this theme in *The Tibetan Book of Great Liberation* (1954), distinguishing between the *tülku,* manifestations of an advanced spiritual leader, and the *tulpa,* the creation of a magician.

It must be emphasized that David-Néel and Evan-Wentz were influenced by theosophy: there is virtually no record in Tibetan practices for the tulpa becoming malevolent and turning against its creator.5 David-Néel's idea that tulpa may be created unintentionally, or through collective belief, may be her own. The *tulpa* in Western discourse can be seen as a combination of theosophical beliefs and a traditional Tibetan concept.

In lucid dream research, an understanding of the apparent autonomy of the figures sometimes encountered during a lucid dream can be sought in terms of Tibetan beliefs. Robert Waggoner interprets these figures primarily as symbolic thoughtforms representing the individual's ideas, expectations and emotions. However, the figures may argue intensively for their autonomous existence and resent the lucid dreamer's comments about 'creating' them, so that other possibilities remain open. Referring to the Tibetan traditions, Waggoner and his co-workers offer criteria for distinguishing between various types of dream figures: symbolic figures, guides and possible deceased entities.6

Not all the experiences of lucid figures and lucidity are positive ones. Sometimes they appear to be unconsciously created by strong emotions during hypnagogic hypnopompic (sleep onset and sleep awakening) states in a time of high stress. Psychologist and lucid dreamer Ed Kellogg has described how hypnopompic states can be lucid and hell- and heaven-like populated seemingly by figures of deceased individuals.7 There is clearly a close connection and transition between lucidity states, false awakenings, nightmares, and sleep paralysis.

Pooka

The pooka has several alternative spellings relating to its diverse origins in Celtic and Germanic mythologies: *pooka* (Irish), *pwca* (Welsh), *bucca* (Cornish), *puck* (Shakespeare), *puk* (Friesian), *pück* (German). Like the tulpa, the pooka is an ambivalent mixture of good and bad, but unlike the tulpa is more likely to change its appearance, taking on animal forms such as a cat, dog, horse, fox, wolf, raven, goat, hare or rabbit. WY Evans-Wentz gives first-hand accounts in his book *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries,* for instance: 'I myself, when a boy of ten or eleven … saw a strange horse run around a seven acres field of ours and change into a woman … and after a couple of courses round the field disappeared … no earthly persuasion would, at the time, have convinced me that I did not see this.'8 Folklorist Wirt Sikes in his book *British Goblins* (1993) gives numerous accounts of the prankish activities of the Welsh *pwca*, a fairy with the power to transform itself at will, which he maintains was the basis for Shakespeare's Puck character.

Djinn

The *djinn* or *jinn* – or *genie* in its anglicized form – derives from an ancient Arabic belief in the existence of non-human spirits. In Islamic belief, djinns are mortal beings with supernatural powers which can be good but are most often regarded as evil or demonic. The belief is that they also can possesses humans.

Journalists Michael Hallowell and Darren Ritson investigated an episode of poltergeist-type phenomena in the northern British town of South Shields, which

besides the typical anomalous movements of objects included messages on mobile phones and began to take on a malevolent form.[9] Despite the claims of witnessing large-scale phenomena nothing was publicly offered in the form of objective recordings. All that was released consisted of personal accounts, albeit including those of the authors, of the authenticity of various phenomena. Nevertheless, SPR investigator Alan Murdie[10] concluded that the phenomena were genuinely paranormal, after reviewing the case and its unpublished material.

Perhaps more remarkable was that in the course of seeking an explanation, Hallowell sought it first in North American Indian rituals and finally found it in the djinn. He then became not only a firm convert to Islamic belief but active advocate of its practices.[11]

Thoughtforms in Western Cultural History

Philosophy

The idea of thoughtforms is found independently in the writings of some Western academics and spiritual leaders.

Jan Baptist Van Helmont was an early seventeenth-century Flemish chemist, physician, and physiologist, founder of so-called 'chemical philosophy' and the first person to systematically investigate gas (a term he coined). Van Helmont considered dreams and visions to be an important source for knowledge.[12] He further believed that humans, being images of God, can likewise create images which, dressed in an appropriate figure by the power of imagination, can become objectively real entities.[13]

Johann Kaspar Lavater, an eighteenth-century Swiss theologian and founder of physiognomics, goes a step further, maintaining that an individual, by the power of imagination, can impress another person or 'soul' with such intensity as to become present before that person in the form of an apparition. Being independent of space, this effect was in no way limited by distance, Lavater thought.[14]

Theosophy

The founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875 was prompted by the claims of George Henry Felt, an American engineer, architect and Egyptologist, that priests in ancient Egypt had the ability to evoke the forms of elemental entities and make them visible; also that he, Felt, had discovered how to emulate this power and furthermore could demonstrate it. In early meetings of the society he entirely failed to do so this, causing disillusion. However, the idea informed a current of thinking in the development of the society: two of its early leaders, Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater devoted a book to the subject *Thought-Forms* (1905) depicting the forms that various emotions, thoughts and actions may take.[15] They identified three types: those that take the form of the thinker; those that take the form of a material object; and those which express feelings, often as an aura around the person. Besant also introduced the concept of 'ensouled thought-forms' along with their benevolent and destructive 'elementals' or metaphysical forces.

Digital Folklore

Writers such as [Brad Steiger](#), Eric Knudsen and Jon Keel have popularized the notion of frightening figures that feature in urban legends, beings such as [Mothman](#), [Slender Man](#), Thin Man, and Men in Black, that are often seen as forms of tulpas. Catholic demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren adopted this approach in their occult 'explanations' for possession and poltergeist episodes. The modern tulpa is thus a product of Internet folklore bearing little or no resemblance to the Tibetan tulpa: it can be created by anyone, tends to become violent and sometimes vents its hostility towards its creator. In one tragic instance, two twelve-year olds attempted to stab a friend to death in order to appease Slender Man, an entirely fictional entity with whom they had become infatuated.[16]

A more creative element associated with the Internet is the concept of the avatar, a Hindu deity embodied in earthly form, which in Internet digital technology has come to denote a graphical image representing a person. This is applied in educational psychology as a so-called 'teachable agent'. In solving computerized tasks, the student, usually a child, rather than being passively taught, actively teaches the imaginary but graphically represented agent or avatar how to solve the problem.[17]

Thoughtforms in Psychology

Because of the inherent extraordinary claims, research related to the concept of thoughtforms is virtually non-existent in mainstream psychology. Casting the net widely, an exception might be found in the study of imaginary playmates, who appear to feature in the lives of a majority (about 65%) of small children. Even here, relatively little is known about their nature and function, although in recent years the consensus view has switched to seeing it as a positive sign of development rather than as deviant;[18] most children know that their imaginary friends 'are not really real'.[19] However, little seems to be known about the children for whom this distinction is not clear. Puhle and Tulloch give first-hand accounts of two individuals who described 'imaginary friends' they believed to be real.[20]

In seeking explanations for these experiences, it should be noted that a complex and as yet unresolved relationships appears to exist between dissociative states, fantasy proneness, hypnotic sensitivity, imaginary playmates during childhood, and psychic experiences.[21] Hypnosis offers some challenging anecdotal accounts. Harvard-educated psychologist [George Estabrooks](#) claimed to have used hypnosis in a hospital ward to produce a group hallucination of an imaginary polar bear. The hallucination, according to Estabrooks, then went on to demonstrate its own autonomy and willpower.[22]

Potential Applications in the Understanding of Psychic Phenomena

A consensus view of the thoughtforms concept devoid of religious and esoteric notions may be usefully applied in the context of certain psi phenomena, although speculatively, in the absence of either experimental research data or concrete evidence. Such a view would begin by dispelling associations with evil forces. Psychical research literature on poltergeist phenomena, to take one example,

shows that even in episodes where considerable material damage occurs, the individuals caught up in it seldom if ever suffer serious injury.

A much-quoted exception is the experience of Joe Fisher, a British author whose close involvement with apparent spirit 'guides' communicating in a mediumistic circle ended in disillusion when they increasingly showed themselves to be dishonest and manipulative. Fisher's suicide at age 53, shortly after the publication of a book describing his journey, has sometimes been attributed to the effects of demonic possession, although it may equally have been caused by personal problems including a failed career and marriage breakup.

Psychological dangers may be considered to be real in psychic episodes, but generally only in the context of a credulous belief in demonic powers.

Mediumship Cases

Even the most evidential cases of spirit communication obtained through mediums have weaknesses and detractors. The debate centres on how much of the evidential material could be explained by prodigious unconscious memory (cryptomnesia), cold reading (subtle cueing and systematic guessing), or a super psi-ability. Attention is rarely directed to the at times rather emphatic declarations given by the communicators that they are living beings and not dead. Could these be genuine expressions by independent thoughtforms created in dissociated states, which believe themselves to be deceased communicators?

A strongly suggestive example of the power of consciousness to create seemingly autonomous thoughtforms is found in mediumship research. In the 1970s, a group in Toronto held sittings aimed at simulating 'spirit' communication by means of physical phenomena. The group began by creating a fictional character, a sixteenth-century English aristocrat, whose story they created in detail, then committed to memory and strongly visualized. Eventually the group succeeded in eliciting rapping noises during sittings, which appeared to have an intelligent source. In its answers to their questions, it essentially confirmed itself to be the character they had created, talking as if it had an independent existence. Naturally, this raises the possibility that the personalities that communicate in such a way in mediumistic séances, and which are taken to be discarnates, may at least sometimes have their origin in the minds of the sitters. (See Philip Psychokinesis Experiments)

Poltergeist Cases

Many researchers of poltergeist phenomena agree that their cause lies in psychokinetic forces erupting in the context of family tensions, often (but not always) with a pubescent adolescent as the focus. William Roll, a leading expert, saw such cases in terms of an 'extended' view of personality, as a field of interacting forces, and demonstrated that many classic cases in which the poltergeist is seen as an independent entity (a 'noisy ghost') actually conform to this pattern.23

An early documented case that took place in Rerrick (now Auchencairn), Scotland in 1695, involved heavy stones being thrown, rapping noises, fires breaking out,

animals becoming disturbed and furniture inexplicably moving. Despite the potential dangers, no bodily harm or long-term damage was caused. The disturbances were witnessed by fourteen individuals, of whom five were clergymen. In its interactions, the poltergeist appeared to confirm the clergymen's view of the disturbances as the work of the devil. Modern commentators prefer to see these intelligences, which clearly reflect prevailing folklore and religious beliefs, as aspects of living people acting in ways that are as yet not at all understood.[24]

Similar views may be taken of modern cases, such as those that occurred in Enfield, London, in the 1970s, and the more recent case in South Shields in the north of England. At Enfield, the typical 'poltergeist' phenomena – noises, furniture movements and suchlike – were followed at a later stage by the emergence of a 'possessing' entity, seemingly a deceased former occupant of the house, that spoke through the voice of a pre-pubescent girl. At South Shields, the phenomena included toys coming to life and attacking members of the household, and threatening text messages being left on mobile phones. In both cases the communicating entity, if genuine, might be regarded as a thoughtform that ran amok.

Apparitions and Ghosts

Certain types of apparitional experience can perhaps be seen as an expression of autonomous thoughtforms. Hauntings or place-bound apparitions might reflect a memory based, repetitive-compulsion thoughtform. Crisis apparitions (those of a person who is dying or in a life-threatening situation) and death-bed apparitions (deceased relatives visible to a dying person) might be regarded as thoughtforms displaying active intention in their attempt to communicate.

There exist also numerous cases where a sense of presence is reported by travellers in conditions of extreme stress, sometimes interpreted as a ghost or discarnate entity. The polar explorer Ernest Shackleton writes:

> I know that during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions on the point, but afterwards Worsley said to me: 'Boss, I had a curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us.'[25]

Experimental Parapsychology

One possible experimental research application concerns the concept of so-called 'psi-missing'. The sense here is not that psi is lacking or missing but rather that it's the opposite of psi-hitting, active in a negative and significant way and used to avoid getting the right answer – even by chance. In such cases, the previous significantly positive scores on tests appear to suddenly reverse their direction and become significantly negative ones.[26] While this remains controversial, it is speculated that the effect may sabotage the laboratory efforts aimed at gaining control over psychic or psi phenomena. Hansen adopts the term *trickster,* used by Carl Jung, to describe how psi-missing and other replication problems bedevil all attempts to 'tame' psychic phenomena.[27] The term may merely represent the

personification of the self-doubt of the experimenter which naturally tends to set in after the initial success. On the other hand, it might also be speculated that the self-doubt takes on a life of its own and gains sinister qualities in the more archetypal, enigmatic form of the trickster.

Relationship to Dissociated States and Self-identity

The integration of thoughtforms into psychological theory raises profound and complex questions concerning the relationship between self-identity and consciousness. The self is usually considered to be malleable and dependent on social context. For psychologist-philosopher [William James](), 'A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him'. Moreover, in recent research with immersive virtual reality equipment, virtual selves have been created whose identity can be manipulated and which visually appear to be located exterior to the person's own body. A leading proponent of this research, philosopher Thomas Metzner, concludes that the self is merely a model or construct which is created by the brain and disappears when not needed, as is clearly demonstrated when we daydream.[28]

The study of psychiatric patients demonstrating possession states led Alan Crabtree to a yet more radical conclusion, that the personality of a normal well-functioning individual in fact consists of sub-personalities organized by an executive or operant self. Where dissociated states occur, the individual's memory has become fragmented among the sub-personalities, each of which has developed its own conscious state associated with this memory. Thoughtforms would occur if these entities become exteriorized and if the dissociation is experienced as being externally enforced, in which case the condition becomes one of possession. A similar, somewhat more elaborate theory developed by [Stanley Krippner]() takes into account the degree of integration versus dissociation and the degree of control versus flow.[29]

Crabtree and Krippner differ radically from conventional philosophers and neuroscientists in accepting psi phenomena as an expression of the essential connectedness of consciousness – a form of panpsychism or extended consciousness. Crabtree considers also the possibility of hierarchical selves, built around a supraliminal self or core consciousness, that can reincarnate and on occasion be infiltrated by memories of its former lives – or even the former lives of others.

Conclusions

The unifying concept behind thoughtforms requires the existence of a non-local or 'extended consciousness' capable of creating entities as a result of extreme personal needs and tensions. Assuming this occurs, these entities or thoughtforms could conceivably develop their own sense of identity and interact with other persons in a meaningful way.

A problem with the concept, besides the absence of confirmatory scientific studies, is that its strength in explaining a range of phenomena is at the same time also its

major weakness: it is all-encompassing. Nevertheless, future experimental investigations might both evaluate and refine the concept. The use of hypnosis (for instance in the Estabrooks claim) seems a promising technique, although its varying components are difficult to control.[30] The altered states of consciousness in which entities might be created also include lucid dreams and the use of psychoactive drugs. A more readily available and manageable technique, as mentioned above, is the use of virtual reality equipment, which has the added benefit of providing a link with mainstream cognitive psychology.

In real life, it may be that thoughtforms sometimes develop spontaneously or in an uncontrolled way. If that is the case, to establish the validity of thoughtforms would constitute a major breakthrough in parapsychology and would be a demonstrable discovery in psychology. Yet there may be a dark side to the belief in thoughtforms. As the case of Joe Fisher seem to illustrate, an exaggerated preoccupation with such phenomena can lead to fears of demonic possession, impacting negatively on mental health.

Adrian Parker and Annekatrin Puhle

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.] Hallowell & Ritson (2009); Fisher (1981).
- [2.] Wangyal (1998), 122-23, 133.
- [3.] Zahler (1998).
- [4.] David-Néel (1932).
- [5.] Mikles & Laycock (2015).
- [6.] Waggoner (2009), chap. 11; Waggoner & McCready (2015), chap. 7; Kellogg (2004).
- [7.] Kellogg (2004).
- [8.] Evans-Wentz (1911), 26.
- [9.] Hallowell & Ritson (2009).
- [10.] Murdie (2010).
- [11.] Hallowell (2014).
- [12.] Schott (2016), chapter 31.3.
- [13.] Horst (1830), vol. 2, 158-59.
- [14.] Horst (1830), vol.2, 159.
- [15.] Besant & Leadbeater (1905).
- [16.] Mikles & Laycock (2015).
- [17.] Sjödén (2015).
- [18.] Klausen et al. (2006).
- [19.] Kennedy-Moore (2013).
- [20.] Puhle & Tulloch (2015).
- [21.] see Irwin (2009), 89-90 .
- [22.] Estabrooks (1927/1957), 93-94.
- [23.] Roll (1972).
- [24.] quoted in Puhle & Parker (2017), 68.
- [25.] Shackleton (1919/1999), 175.
- [26.] Carpenter (2004).
- [27.] Hansen (2001).
- [28.] Rothma (2018).
- [29.] Krippner (2000).
- [30.] Parker (2015a, 2015b).