

# Robert Thouless

Robert Thouless (1894-1984) was an English social psychologist and parapsychologist, best known for his cipher tests of postmortem survival and for introducing 'psi' as a collective term for psychic phenomena.

## Life and Career

Robert Henry Thouless was born in Norwich, England and studied at Cambridge University. His first publication, *Introduction to the Psychology of Religion* (1922), was based on his PhD thesis. After serving in World War I as a signals officer he lectured in psychology at the universities of Manchester and Glasgow. In 1938 he moved to Cambridge as a fellow of Corpus Christi College, winning a readership in the education department in 1945. He was president of the psychology section of the British Association and of the British Psychological Society (1949-50).

In 1925 he published *General and Social Psychology*, which went through five editions. He is credited with important contributions to the experimental study of perception, notably with two 1931 papers in the *British Journal of Psychology* (1931), dealing with shape constancy.<sup>1</sup> He also gained expertise in experimental method and the use of statistics in psychology. His best-known book is *Straight and Crooked Thinking* (1932) (*How to Think Straight* in the USA), a practical manual on critical thinking.<sup>2</sup>

He was the father of [David Thouless](#), a Nobel Prize laureate in physics.

## Psychical Research

Thouless first became interested in psychical research on the publication in 1934 of [JB Rhine](#)'s book *Extra Sensory Perception*.<sup>3</sup> He later became somewhat sceptical of Rhine's results, criticizing a lack of essential detail in his published reports.<sup>4</sup>

He was elected to the council of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR) and served as its president between 1942 and 1944.

Thouless carried out experiments in card-guessing, with only chance results, but obtained significant scores in dice-throwing tests.<sup>5</sup> Unlike those who believed that strong concentration is the way to achieve high scores, he concluded that too strong a motivation is liable to create anxiety and lead to failure and that the ideal is to aim for an 'effortless intention to succeed'.<sup>6</sup>

He approached the subject of psi phenomena from the point of view of an experimental psychologist but held that observational methods were equally important.<sup>7</sup>

## Introduction of 'Psi'

Thouless introduced the term 'psi' in a 1942 SPR address and an article in the same year in the *British Journal of Psychology*, crediting [Bertold Wiesner](#), a physiologist who was interested in parapsychology, with having first proposed it.<sup>8</sup> He argued that the existing terms 'telepathy', 'clairvoyance' and 'precognition' – also the term 'extra-sensory perception' that was adopted in their place by [JB Rhine](#) – were misleading, since they made assumptions that were likely wrong. He elaborated the concept in a 1947 paper co-authored with Wiesner,<sup>9</sup> which, following the publication of results of successful dice-throwing experiments by Rhine's team, extended psi to include psychokinesis. The authors' further designations of ESP as 'psi-gamma' and PK as 'psi-kappa' are sometimes used by parapsychologists.

In this paper, Thouless and Wiesner suggested that all four entities (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis) should be considered as aspects of essentially the same process. They further proposed that psi functions, hitherto considered abnormal, 'are merely unusual forms of processes which are themselves usual and commonplace, and that in their usual and commonplace form, they are to be found as elements in the normal processes of perception and motor activity'.<sup>10</sup>

## Survival Cipher Tests

Thouless believed his most important work was in the question of postmortem survival.<sup>11</sup> He maintained that the subject needed experimental clarification and multiple replications, stating, 'The proper reason for trying to find scientific evidence on the problem of survival lies in its implications for science, not for religion'.<sup>12</sup>

A common idea was that a medium, by communicating with a surviving deceased individual, might learn the contents of a sealed message left by that person for the purpose of proving survival. But such a test could only be attempted once. Accordingly, he developed the idea of an enciphered message that would remain unsolved until, having died, he was able to communicate the key through a medium, thus proving that he had survived death.<sup>13</sup>

In 1948, he published two such ciphers. The first, lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* encrypted using the Playfair cipher, was quickly deciphered using the keyword SURPRISE, a considerable feat in the pre-computer age, but by whom and by what method remains unknown.<sup>14</sup>

Thouless responded by creating a more complex third code, also based on Playfair but with two keywords. Both the second and third codes remained unsolved when Thouless died in 1984. However, no medium was able to provide the information needed to break the encryption, suggesting either that Thouless had been unable to transmit it successfully or that he had not survived death.

The third code was solved by James J Gillogly in 1995 with the aid of a computer, the keywords revealed as BLACK BEAUTY.<sup>15</sup>

The second code, based on a book cipher, was solved in 2019 by Richard Bean, an IT expert at the University of Queensland, who used computers to scan all 37,000 English-language books in [Project Gutenberg](#). After about five days this revealed

the source text as the poem *The Hound of Heaven* by Francis Thompson, and the deciphered message as 'A number of successful experiments of this kind would give strong evidence for survival'.[16](#)

## Works

### Books

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1.](#) Beloff (1985), 221.
- [2.](#) Beloff (1985), 221.
- [3.](#) Berger (1985), 56.
- [4.](#) Thouless (1935), 34-37.
- [5.](#) Thouless (1951).
- [6.](#) Beloff (1985), 222.
- [7.](#) Haynes (1982), 212; Thouless (1942b).
- [8.](#) Thouless (1942a, 1942b).
- [9.](#) Thouless & Wiesner (1947).
- [10.](#) Thouless & Wiesner (1947), 179.
- [11.](#) Berger (1985), 57.
- [12.](#) Thouless (1952), 19.
- [13.](#) Thouless (1948a).
- [14.](#) Bean (2019).
- [15.](#) Bean (2019).
- [16.](#) Bean (2019).