

EDITORIAL

Lately I've been reviewing the issues concerned with what's usually called the "super-psi hypothesis." Very roughly, that hypothesis is the claim that psychic functioning is considerably more extensive and controllable than its seemingly modest experimental manifestations suggest, so much so that it might even play a pervasive role in everyday affairs and operate on a large scale.

I've already tackled this topic at some length, in order both to clarify the hypothesis and to evaluate the arguments pro and con (see, e.g., Braude 1997, 2003). Here, I want simply to reconsider a suggestion I made in 1997, and which I now think may be more interesting than I appreciated at the time.

Some like to protest that the super-psi hypothesis is unfalsifiable, because it seems that we can never prove or demonstrate that psychic functioning did *not* occur, no matter what the evidence turns out to be. If (as proponents of the super-psi hypothesis suggest) our psychic functioning can be sneaky or naughty—that is, if it can be inconspicuous and pervasive and be triggered by unconscious needs and desires, and if we can't specify clear or useful limits to its degree of magnitude or refinement, then we can't, strictly speaking, falsify hypotheses positing its operation. So for example, we can never know for certain whether a particular car crash was caused normally or by virtue of somebody's PK. In the absence of something like a PK meter, the only difference between those two scenarios would be in their unobservable causal histories. (And even if we had a PK meter, we encounter the nagging problem of a regress of confirmation: Whatever we observe happening to the meter could also be the result of operator or onlooker PK—or seemingly random PK from some other source. So how do we determine for certain what caused the meter fluctuations?)

I've argued, however, that this alleged problem may be of little significance, so long as we're willing to appeal to higher-level theoretical criteria for choosing one hypothesis over another. For example, even if a car crash caused by sneaky psi is observationally indistinguishable from one caused normally, we could still have reason—although never a conclusive reason—for choosing one explanation over the other. As with many conspiracy theories, we might have to string together a cumbersome and convoluted array of facts to support the sneaky-psi alternative, but in principle it could be done. We'd have to find plausible links to the needs and interests of the presumed aggressor and tell a reasonable story about

(say) conflicts of interest between that person and the driver of the car. We could also look for revealing patterns in the data (e.g., accidents befalling people the agent doesn't like). Of course in many cases, we'll have too little information to know whether the super-psi explanation is a live option rather than a mere possibility in logical space. But in those cases where we can make educated guesses of the aforementioned sort, we can look for the story that makes the most sense systematically and which appeals to our instincts about explanatory simplicity. And although the process is undoubtedly more fallible and uncertain than we would wish, it's essentially the procedure we follow any time we explain human behavior.

Indeed, we frequently find ourselves weighing rival, but strictly unfalsifiable, hypotheses—in fact, nearly every time we speculate about the mental lives of ourselves and others. Consider the hypotheses “*S* is angry with me” and “*S* is not angry with me.” In many real-life situations, there may be no way to decide conclusively between them—at least not with anything like the certitude many feel we should aim for with legitimate scientific hypotheses. For example, even if *S* says he's not angry, one can always interpret that remark as (say) a sign of *S*'s reluctance to admit his anger, or a sign of self-deception or lack of self-awareness. Similarly, in many cases there's no way to distinguish evidence suggesting the absence of anger from evidence suggesting veiled anger. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean that deciding among such hypotheses is a mere crap shoot. Indeed, some people obviously have a “nose” for making such choices. That is, it's clear that some people are much better than others at selecting among these sorts of rival hypotheses, and accordingly they make less of a shamble of their lives than those who are more explanatorily challenged.

In fact, our psychological survival depends on our ability to weigh rival hypotheses about others' mental states. It's by means of such a process that we reliably determine whom to confide in, how to speak to other people (e.g., which issues to avoid, what “tone” to take), whom we can rely on in times of stress, etc. And clearly, the ability to do this requires a mastery of a certain kind of theoretical activity: something at least very similar to generating hypotheses about people's intentions, desires, needs, interests, capacities, etc. And even though these hypotheses (or conjectures) may not be falsifiable, many are highly justifiable on pragmatic grounds. That's demonstrated by the way they successfully guide our dealings with other people.

No doubt the uncertainty of hypothesizing about sneaky or naughty psi is generally greater than the uncertainty of our everyday conjectures about others' mental states. There may not even be many psi-regularities, or they may be far less conspicuous than ordinary psychological regularities.

Or perhaps very few of our psi efforts successfully negotiate the complex underlying network of competing interests and interactions in which all such attempts would be embedded.¹ Nevertheless, in both cases, the information needed to choose one hypothesis over another requires a certain amount of digging. Of course, in the case of psychic functioning, the process is more daunting, and in many cases we'll simply have to conclude that we don't know what to say. But that's not unprecedented, or a sign that we're entertaining hypotheses that are empirically defective. Many times in the case of acceptable everyday attempts to explain human behavior, we likewise don't know what to say.

So how might we hope to detect the operation of extensive or refined under-the-surface psi in the face of the various obstacles to doing so confidently (much less conclusively)? I've often suggested that we should look at people who are remarkably lucky or unlucky. Of course, many cases of exceptional luck or misfortune can be explained easily by reference to familiar processes. But other cases seem to have no obvious explanation, especially when streaks of luck or misfortune continue for a while. Similarly, some people seem consistently to have a knack for making highly profitable speculative business or investment decisions, whereas others seem regularly to fail at this activity, perhaps more than would be expected if the process were random. Some (but not others) seem repeatedly to operate within a surrounding maelstrom of chaos or disaster, and of these some always seem to be victims, while others seem always to escape unharmed. Why are these sorts of regularities sometimes strikingly long-term? Why is it that the lives of certain people are regularly filled with annoyances and difficulties, apparently not of their own making, while those of others are relatively trouble-free in the same respects? Why do some people repeatedly have difficulties with the postal service, mail-order companies, bank computers or personnel, or automobiles, appliances, or other purchases (including items noted for their reliability), while others seem never to have any such problems?

We needn't assume that there are simple answers, or any conclusive answers, to these questions, and we certainly shouldn't take it for granted that psi is operating in these cases. After all, streaks of good or bad luck might still be fortuitous, or (in the case of bad luck) the result of ongoing unconscious efforts to sabotage our own lives. But if psi functioning does operate in the world on a day-to-day basis, one might reasonably expect it to manifest in these ways, even if it doesn't do so consistently or often. And in that case, it might be worthwhile to carry out depth-psychological studies of lucky and unlucky people. We could look for connections between their good or bad fortune and such things as their self-image, hidden agendas, and

relations with others. Of course (as already noted), no definite conclusions about the presence of psi will emerge from such studies. But occasionally a psi hypothesis might be particularly enlightening or suggestive in the way it systematizes an otherwise motley array of unconnected occurrences, or in the way it makes sense out of otherwise seemingly paradoxical features of a person's life.

Another possible stage of operation for everyday psi is the scientific laboratory. In fact, a disturbing aspect of acknowledging the possibility of even modest psi in life is that it might contaminate ordinary and otherwise ostensibly clean experiments in science. After all, there's no reason to think that PK on machines or quantum processes operates only in the context of parapsychology experiments. It would be foolish to suppose that the only machines susceptible to PK are those designed to test for PK. So for all we know, PK might play a role in the everyday gathering of scientific data. That's especially plausible when we consider the possibility of experimenter-psi, and also the fact that in conventional areas of science, a great many scientists jointly expect or hope for certain specific kinds of results. In fact, orthodox scientists are at least as motivated as parapsychologists to get their desired results. And because they are not engaged in parapsychological experimentation and are probably not thinking about psi (or seriously entertaining its possibility), they probably don't suffer from the inhibiting fear of psi that arguably keeps results in parapsychology at relatively non-threatening levels of significance. Indeed, it wouldn't be surprising if the resistance of some scientists to parapsychology stems (in part, at least) from the unacknowledged fear that unchecked and uncontrollable psi could cast a shadow of doubt over centuries of accepted scientific results.

Anyway, this brings me to the suggestion I made some time ago, and which I'm now entertaining once again. Let's suppose that psi might have influenced experimental outcomes throughout the history of normal science. Although there's probably no way to demonstrate that this occurred, it might still be possible to lend confirmatory weight to the supposition. For example, the following intriguing line of inquiry might be fruitful, given enough time and patience. Suppose our scientific theories evolve in such a way that what were formerly considered to be crucial experiments are now seen as comparatively peripheral. Or suppose that technological advances reveal that earlier crucial measurements or experimental results were crude and misleading. Suppose, in other words, that we come to view formerly important experiments as relatively unimportant or flawed, so that their results no longer matter for scientific theory. If this reassessment of earlier experiments became widely accepted, we could then conduct those experiments as they had been conducted initially, to see if they yield the

same results as before. Presumably, the experimenters in this new round of tests would lack the emotional investment (e.g., level of interest, or desire to see a certain result) of their predecessors. So if the current results are more consistent with currently prevailing scientific beliefs than with those that prevailed when the tests were originally conducted (e.g., if our current employment of the earlier methods of measurement yields the distinctly different sorts of results we would now expect), that might suggest that the results have all along been at least skewed by experimenter expectation and possible psi influence.

Almost certainly, the usual procedures and criteria for supporting scientific research probably work against this ever being funded. Moreover, I'm not prepared yet to suggest how this proposal might actually be implemented. Instead, I hope that some clever *JSE* readers might have ideas about how to take the proposal to the next level.

Note

¹ For details about that presumed underlying causal nexus, see Braude (1997, 2003).

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References Cited

- Braude, S. E. (1997). *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science, Revised Edition*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
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