

## **Examining the Evidence for Psi in the Context of Scientific Revolution**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is concerned with the representation of psi in current philosophy texts. It undertakes an analysis of the current status of evidence for psi according to a Kuhnian scientific revolution. This is based on an analysis of the nature of the dispute between those who maintain that psi does not exist (the dominant one expressed in most modern philosophy texts), and those who believe that science will eventually be able to cope with the anomalous phenomena associated with psi effects. An appeal is made for a more even-handed representation in future philosophy texts using this interpretation to help ameliorate the representation of psi phenomena.

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### INTRODUCTION

“We have done all that we can when the critic has nothing left to allege except that the investigator is in the trick. But, when he [sic] has nothing else left to allege, he will allege that.” (quoted in Griffin, 1977, p. 44). These words were spoken by the philosopher Henry Sidgwick in 1882. They were part of his presidential address for the inauguration of the Society for Psychical Research. The remarks are relevant today because in the subsequent 119 years the results of academic investigation into psi phenomena can be seen to have created just such a situation.

Implicit in most mentions of psi in philosophy texts is the assumption that the evidence for psi has been created by either fraudulent means or unintentional self-delusion. This position is founded on a modern interpretation of Hume’s miracle argument (about which more below). There is, however, a long and fascinating history of academic inquiry into psi phenomena, and there are a growing number of academics who study the evidence that investigation into psi has produced. It is due to this dedicated and tenacious group of philosophers, psychologists, physicists, biologists and parapsychologists (among others, both past and present) that

knowledge of what psi might be—and repeatable evidence for psi—has gained the acceptance it has to date. In fact, even some of the harshest critics of the evidence for psi have acknowledged that recent experiments have produced something that at least *appears* to be psi. They are “now of the opinion that repeated demonstrations of psi-effects are no longer of interest, and suggest instead that priority in parapsychology should be given to seeking a theoretical framework for psi in terms of lawful relationships” (Parker, Persson & Haller, 2000, p. 65).

It is the interpretation of the evidence for psi that has given rise to a confusing situation. On the one hand there is a small but dedicated group of academics pursuing studies in the field of parapsychology and a small group of other academics using this information; on the other hand there is virtually no recognition that the evidence for psi should be taken into consideration in modern philosophical speculation. The reasons for this disparate approach to the evidence for psi stem from deep-seated and opposing beliefs about what is possible in this world. This paper will argue that these differences indicate that the evidence for psi has put modern science into the ‘crisis stage’ of a scientific revolution (as set out by Thomas Kuhn in his book *The structure of scientific revolutions*). In doing so it will answer the following questions: Why is the evidence for psi either not mentioned or dismissed in many mainstream texts? Should this representation be changed? And finally, if so, then how?<sup>1</sup>

#### THE REPRESENTATION OF PSI IN MAINSTREAM PHILOSOPHY

The following is an example of how the evidence for psi is presented in a text on contemporary philosophy of mind. It is representative of how psi is usually presented when it is mentioned in such texts. Here psi is referred to as ‘parapsychological phenomena’.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper does not present a rundown of the available evidence for psi, or psi effects. This has been done numerous times before and to a much more thorough degree than the space available in this paper would allow. For the reader who is interested in finding out more about the history of the investigation into psi phenomena and the current state of affairs of the evidence for psi, I recommend the book *The conscious universe* by Dean Radin (1997). For an in-depth look at the philosophical aspects and implications of psi I recommend the book: *ESP and psychokinesis A philosophical examination*, by Stephen E. Braude (1979).

Of course, it *could* turn out otherwise, if, say, there were any satisfactory evidence of so-called “parapsychological” phenomena, e.g. telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance. If there were such phenomena, then existing physical theory would certainly appear to be inadequate. But there is no evidence of such phenomena (or so most current philosophers of mind assume). Moreover, even if there were, it is unclear how it would bear upon the explanation of vast amounts of perfectly normal human and animal behaviour when such evidence seems even less likely to arise. (Rey, 1997, p. 72)<sup>2</sup>

The author Rey has recognised that psi could be used to solve some of the philosophical problems encountered in the study of the mind; he is unclear exactly how it would help and has doubts about how effective it would be. But psi is at least mentioned and the potential recognised. However, the possibility of using the evidence for psi in this argument is quickly brushed aside when he states with conviction: **“But there is no evidence of such phenomena (or so most current philosophers of mind assume)”** (Rey, 1997, p. 72). It is important to note that this statement is not referenced, nor is there any subsequent information about who these philosophers are or how they came to this conclusion nor who the philosophers are who do not accord with this view. It is presented as a *fait accompli* and not open to serious questioning despite the ramifications this evidence may have on the issues involved in the study of the mind.

That neither the argument for nor against the evidence for psi is mentioned is important. It is important because it gives the reader a false impression. It gives the impression that there are no contentious issues involved, that it is generally accepted that there is no evidence for psi and that it would be ridiculous to question this assumption. As mentioned previously there has in fact been over 119 years of serious investigation into the anomalous phenomena now known as psi. The evidence has been accumulated from a huge database of laboratory experiments and, although the statistical analyses are questioned in some quarters, the serious criticisms about methodology and procedure have been addressed over the past 50 years. There is also much evidence that has been collected and

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the use of this quote is not a criticism of this book. In fact, the book should be commended for mentioning psi and its possible role in solving contemporary problems in the philosophy of mind. There are many texts that do not even broach the issue. The example from this book is used only to illustrate the way that evidence for psi is often presented in current philosophy texts.

studied about spontaneous psi and there is a widespread popular belief that psi is possible. The exact nature of psi and its implications are still to be determined but they would appear to be enormous.

How can these two interpretations of the evidence co-exist? How can the representation of psi in these texts remain without references and further discussion when there are universities that actively support academic inquiry into psi? More questions spring to mind: On what is this assumption based and why is it so dominant? In attempting to answer these questions, we come to the nub of the issue. This is that the representation of the status of the evidence for psi is based on a *belief* of what is possible in this world, as dictated by what is currently known of the workings of it. The next section looks at the nature of the arguments for and against the validity of psi phenomena with this in mind.

#### THE TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE EVIDENCE FOR PSI

When he states that there is ‘no evidence for psi’, what is the author of this book on the philosophy of mind really saying? There is after all ample evidence for what *appears* to be psi. Surely this requires the attention of philosophy if even some of the most ardent critics of psi have acknowledged that the field of parapsychology has produced what appears to be evidence for psi. Underlying this statement is the sentiment that the nature of the evidence for psi and the possibility of the evidence pointing towards the actual existence and operation of psi phenomena is nil.

The basis for the assumption that there is no evidence for psi stems from the modern interpretation of David Hume’s argument against miracles. It was first presented by George Price in 1955. In this article he maintained that it is better to believe that all evidence for psi has been obtained by fraudulent means or self-delusion than that something can exist that is completely incompatible with modern physics. To support this assertion he showed that psi phenomena were incompatible with modern physics and accordingly he believed that he was justified in concluding that there is no evidence for psi (Flew, 1987, p. 217). He did this by referring to the work of the philosopher C. D. Broad who had analysed how psi effects are incompatible with nine ‘basic limiting principles’ (Flew, 1987, pp. 37-52). The argument contends that since we do know that fraud has been perpetrated and we do know that psi transgresses the laws of nature then it is far more rational to attribute any instance of psi to fraud or illusion (intentional or not) than to maintain that something such as psi exists. It is this conclusion that we see perpetuated in current philosophy texts like the one mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Hume first used this argument as an ‘everlasting check’ against people who claimed to have witnessed

miracles that were in fact produced by fraudulent means (presumably as opposed to those genuinely produced by a God) (Flew, 1987, pp. 204-208). Price modernised the argument to target instances of apparent psi but the formulation of the argument is the same. People who uphold this argument are often referred to as Humean skeptics and this paper will use this label to describe this position.

The person who maintains this argument has become, as Henry Sidgwick predicted, only able to criticise the evidence for psi effects on the basis that they have been produced by tricks (wittingly or not) on behalf of the investigator or the investigator's subjects. This is a perfectly valid stance to take but as the data amass and the weight and standing of the investigators gain more acceptance, the weaker this stance becomes. The question is have we reached this watershed point yet?

The modern interpretation of the Humean miracle argument in regard to psi has its detractors. Shortly after the Price article was published Paul Meehl and Michael Scriven wrote one in reply. In it they made the comment that to maintain this Humean skeptical argument there are two points that must hold. The first is that psi is incompatible with modern science, and the second is that modern science is complete and correct. If either of these is not true then the Humean skeptic is left without a basis for the assumption that all evidence for psi must have been obtained through fraudulent or mistaken means (Flew, 1987, p. 230). It is the second point that poses the best challenge to this argument and I doubt that there are many philosophers who would be willing to uphold such a point of view. It is interesting that hidden behind the assumption that there is no evidence for psi, there lies this assertion. It is also possible to argue that the evidence for psi is valid but that it does not defy the laws of modern science. That is, it challenges them but it does not transgress them. This is a weaker position given what is currently known about the apparent operation of psi; however it should be recognised as a possibility.

But the purpose here is not to delve too far into the debate between these points of view. It is enough to show that at the basis of the Humean skeptical argument is the belief that modern science is complete and correct enough to maintain that something like psi cannot possibly exist. Instead, two points should be emphasised: first, that the assumption made in the text that there is no evidence for psi is made on the basis of beliefs that would not be upheld by most philosophers if they had knowledge of the foundations of these assumptions and, second, that these arguments are not able to be resolved on rational grounds alone, as they each involve a belief as to what the evidence for psi entails rather than an interpretation of the evidence itself. The second point is explored more fully below.

The argument against the evidence for psi is based on the belief that psi cannot exist. This belief is founded on the basis that modern science cannot accommodate the anomalous phenomena that evidence for psi produces. This argument does not deny that there is what appears to be evidence for psi. What it claims is that it is not possible for this evidence to exist given what we currently know about the workings of the world, which are based on the modern scientific view. It is an argument that reinforces itself once the initial step is taken. In fact it almost ceases to be an argument because it is a statement about what is possible in the world and what is not. No matter how many times it appears as if psi is in operation, for someone who believes it *cannot* exist, it is not until they change that belief will they be able to accept the possibility that evidence for psi is real and not manufactured by fraud or self-delusion. In other words, according to this view, there is no evidence for psi because there cannot possibly be given what we know about the world.

Conversely, once it is accepted that there is evidence for psi and that this evidence does indeed challenge modern science, it must be accepted that either some laws will need to be revised and the anomalous phenomena incorporated into them or new ones discovered. This is based on a belief that the laws of modern science are able to adapt or change to such an extent that they can contend with the anomalous phenomena that the evidence for the operation of psi has produced.

The arguments for and against the existence of psi are therefore based more on belief as to the state of affairs about what is possible in the world rather than purely on the evidence that the investigation of psi has produced. They acknowledge that the evidence for psi poses a challenge to the modern scientific view of the world, but the Humean skeptic takes this to indicate that psi cannot exist, whereas the proponents of the arguments against this view take it to mean that psi will need to be incorporated into a new, or at least revised, worldview. The fact that only one side of the debate is currently represented in mainstream philosophy is due to this particular characteristic, namely, that these arguments cannot be reconciled as each of them involves beliefs about anomalous phenomena which have arisen under the current worldview. Traditionally the more conservative explanation remains dominant, which is why this is the one being perpetuated in philosophical texts. This indicates that the state of the evidence for psi could be in the crisis stage of a Kuhnian paradigm shift. The next section will discuss the state of the evidence for psi in terms of this stage. This interpretation will be used to argue that it is beneficial for the evidence for psi to be represented in mainstream philosophical texts as a possibility to be explored to solve current problems, and that this interpretation might make

the presentation of this information more palatable to those who wish to maintain the assumption that psi cannot possibly exist.

#### THE CRISIS STAGE

According to Thomas Kuhn, a change of paradigm will occur in the following stages: first some anomalies will arise that cannot be explained readily by the current scientific worldview. Then, as the anomalies grow larger and become even less explicable in current terms, a crisis stage emerges. This is when it becomes apparent that something is not quite right with the current theories but it is not known in exactly what way they should be changed or refined in order to explain the anomalies that have arisen. At this stage there will be a small number of scientists who will accept that the current worldview is not sufficient to explain the amount of anomalous phenomena that has been obtained. A small number of people will be found working with the anomalous phenomena who believe that eventually the anomalies will somehow be used to create a new paradigm based on a revised or new worldview. The situation will continue until a problem in the current paradigm is solved by an explanation using the anomalous phenomena. This will show that the anomalies can be used to refine our understanding of the world even if they challenge previously accepted beliefs. After this has happened, the new paradigm will gradually be accepted until a majority of scientists are operating using the new worldview as old laws have been revised or new ones created by the explanation of the anomalies that threw the last paradigm into a state of crisis. Those who continue to maintain that the new paradigm is not workable even when a large majority of their profession is using it will cease to be able to work constructively in their field (Kuhn, 1996, pp. 158-159).

In 2001 we still have the situation where a handful of professionals are actively working with psi but the rest of mainstream science and philosophy appears to be oblivious to it. This is because it is still the case that the anomalous phenomena with which researchers into psi are dealing raise more problems than they solve. Psi challenges our basic notions of time, space and causality, and it is far from clear how psi might fully be explained or what ramifications it may have for theories of consciousness. It will not be until the anomalous phenomena are used to solve a contemporary problem (or problems) in the sciences that the possibility of a new paradigm will be in serious contention with the existing one. Only once this has happened will the evidence for psi be used more widely as a problem-solving tool rather than a problem-creating one. This will bring us into the resolution stage of a scientific revolution in which the paradigms

will contend for dominant position based on their respective ability to best explain how the world works. This is why it is important for the evidence for psi to gain entrance into mainstream scientific and philosophical problem-solving areas.

But where do we start? Science textbooks will not start to present the evidence for psi when the evidence challenges so many of the theories already present in those textbooks. It would be akin to getting somebody to toll their own death bell. Instead, I propose a solution based on two of Kuhn's observations of previous scientific revolutions. Kuhn points out two things that happen during the response to the crisis stage of paradigm changes. First, that "the decision to reject one paradigm is always simultaneously the decision to accept another, and the judgment leading to that decision involves the comparison of both paradigms with nature *and* with each other" (Kuhn, 1996, p. 77). It is not a matter of being right or wrong, it is a matter of which paradigm is more successfully used that will ensure both its survival and wider acceptance, but the two need to be in contention with each other. If one is invisible then it cannot be used in this constructive manner. He also comments that in the past philosophy has been the discipline most able to cope with analysing the anomalies that have given rise to the crisis. In this stage thought experiments and philosophical analysis are more useful tools than those of traditional scientific inquiry because the current worldview can no longer be used to explain them but a new workable worldview has yet to emerge (Kuhn, 1996, p. 88).

#### A SOLUTION

One of the first steps that should be taken is to address the issue of a fairer representation of the evidence for psi in philosophical texts, and that this should be done in the light of a Kuhnian crisis stage. Hopefully this will enable those who wish to maintain the dominant view that there is no evidence for psi to accept the possibility that psi could be used to solve current problems. This is because it will not be presented as an outright challenge to the dominant view, which previous rational debate has failed to resolve, but rather as an option open to investigation. This is an appeal to the spirit of philosophical fair play where once it is recognized that we have a situation in which conflicting paradigms, rather than arguments, are at issue, it is only right to let them fight it out fairly with all sides represented by a full team. This will enable future students of philosophy to start using the evidence for psi as a problem-solving tool and if this is successful then it will filter down into the mainstream sciences.

To go over briefly how this conclusion has been reached, this is a synopsis of the paper so far: We have seen that the competing beliefs about



what the evidence for psi entails are incompatible. They are representations of beliefs about what is possible in the world, not about the evidence itself. The dominant one is the traditional argument as represented in the text that was quoted at the beginning of the paper, namely, that psi cannot exist because the evidence for it poses too many challenges to the current worldview. Despite this prevailing perspective parapsychology has continued to grow and produce results, and a handful of other academics are investigating the evidence. There still is, however, a massive resistance to the possibility of psi, as anyone who has done work in this area will be fully aware. The evidence for psi is unlikely to be presented in mainstream scientific textbooks at this stage because it challenges too many of the tenets of modern science without providing enough answers or another working paradigm.

Areas where psi could be used as a problem-solving tool are many. Attempts have already been made which use psi to postulate new theories of the mind and explain some of the mysteries that quantum physics has thrown up such as nonlocality (Radin, 1997, p. 282). As Rey recognised *if* psi were considered a possibility its application to theories of the mind would be profound. Consciousness studies, particularly the study of how a person's will and intent affects the body, could benefit from a look at how psi might explain things like psychosomatic illnesses. All of our current notions of what information is accessible from the world around us are challenged by the possible existence of psi and the final implications of this on theology, technology and space/time theories can only be guessed at at this stage.

What this paper argues is for philosophy to provide a neutral boxing ring where the contenders that the arguments for and against the existence of psi have produced can parry and spar with the analytical tools of philosophy as umpire. In this arena the Humean skeptic, the proponents for a new worldview and those for a revised worldview will be able to discuss, compare and analyze the implications that the evidence for psi has for our understanding of the world. Eventually one will be deemed the winner because of its superior capability to explain some of the conundrums that are now faced in modern science. The first step is for philosopher/scientists and scientist/philosophers to have access to the arena by presenting the three possibilities in philosophical texts that deal with these issues.

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