

A Layperson's Guide to the Theory of Psychopraxia¹

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ABSTRACT: In this brief article, the author argues that use of the terms “ESP” and “PK” often leads to ambiguities as to which of the ostensibly two processes is occurring. A particularly clear case of this is the “telepathy” situation, where ESP (of various types) or PK or both could be involved. It is argued that the paranormal process is not dual but unitary in nature; the author calls this single process “psychopraxia” (“the self accomplishing ends”), and discusses it in the context of a new theory of the paranormal.

If, for the sake of argument, we exclude the vast question of life after death, modern parapsychologists could be said to be interested in essentially two phenomena: ESP, and PK. “ESP” is short for “extrasensory perception”, which I have defined elsewhere as “paranormal cognition; the acquisition of information about an external event, object or influence (mental or physical; past, present or future) otherwise than through any of the known sensory channels” (Thalbourne, 1982, p. 27). Examples are telepathy (mind-to-mind ESP), clairvoyance (mind-to-object ESP) and precognition (ESP of the future). “PK” on the other hand is short for “psychokinesis”, which, again, I have defined elsewhere as “paranormal

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action—term introduced...to refer to the direct influence of mind on a physical system without the mediation of any known physical energy” (Thalbourne, 1982, p. 61). Examples would be paranormal metal-bending, levitation, paranormal influence on dice, and perhaps psychic healing. Note that PK is occasionally called “telekinesis”.

The trouble with “ESP” and “PK” as labels is that in many paranormal experiments and other ostensibly paranormal situations it is quite unclear which of the two processes is occurring, and this engenders ambiguity about the process responsible for the results. Take for example the famous ganzfeld experiment (Bem & Honorton, 1994). In such a study one participant is designated the “receiver”: they lie on a bed or sit in comfortable chair, have playing in their ears, first, relaxation instructions, and later “white” or “pink” noise (which sounds a little like the seaside, but is less structured), and over their eyes they have halved ping-pong balls onto which is shone a red or blue light. The purpose of this “audiovisual ganzfeld (‘ganzfeld’ = ‘total field’)” is to create an environment where the sensory stimulation is unpatterned, with the result that the participant becomes more aware of what is being produced by their own mind—dream-like images and so forth.

Most ganzfeld procedures have a “sender” participant, who looks at and attempts to “send” a message about some randomly selected sensory stimulus such as a film clip or an interesting still photograph. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe exactly how one goes about determining how successful the “transmission” has been, let us note simply that this can be done, and the judging process results in a score which objectively signifies degree of success.

Let us suppose that we have a ganzfeld experiment of this general kind. Let us suppose further that we have engaged in the necessary statistical analysis, and overall above-chance success has been yielded by the scores. Information at the sender’s end has apparently appeared, to a greater or lesser degree, at the receiver’s end. How did it get there?

One’s initial impulse, given the “sender”/“receiver” terminology is to suppose that one or more extrasensory events have occurred. However, specifying exactly *what* has happened is difficult and well nigh impossible. First of all, success could have resulted by telepathy: the appearance of the stimulus in the sender’s mind is causally involved in the appearance of similar imagery in the mind of the receiver. On the other hand the *receiver* might have obtained the information directly from the so-called sender’s mind; or telepathy could be a two-way process of sending and receiving. Alternatively, the information could have come directly from the physical pictorial stimulus (this being an instance of clairvoyance). Parapsychologists have long recognized this difficulty in separating telepathy

from clairvoyance when a sender is involved, and have coined the expression “general extrasensory perception (GESP)” to describe such setups.

However, the ambiguities do not stop there. What is to prevent the sender from *psychokinetically* influencing the brain and thereby the mental processes of the receiver? (The possibility of this form of PK has long been recognized in parapsychology, starting with F. W. H. Myers [1903] who talked about “telergy”, then Thouless and Wiesner’s [1947] concept of “kappa-telepathy”, up to Stanford’s [1974] concept of MOBIA, or mental or behavioural influence of an agent [i.e., a sender]). It is thus perhaps slightly unorthodox but nevertheless not improper to assert that every experiment in so-called telepathy is really an experiment in psychokinesis. The PK explanation is theoretically viable (if not often actually chosen). Such flexibility in the categorisation of the paranormal effect is, I argue, cumbersome, unwelcome and in the last resort unnecessary. The theory of psychopraxia comes to the rescue, but I shall say a little more before I get to that.

The terminology situation would be quite different if we were to argue that everything in the universe is matter, and that there is no such thing as mental events like images and sensations that are not in point of fact aspects of the nervous system. When we have a thought, what is happening is something in the brain, and when we will something to happen that faculty of will is likewise an aspect of our brain functioning. This point of view is called philosophical materialism. I argue that if we are consistent philosophical materialists, the whole idea of ESP collapses into the category PK. The label “ESP” can now only validly refer to physical events going on in our brain and nervous system, as the sender or recipient of psychokinetic impulses. So we *could* simplify our categories in this philosophical fashion.

There is also a philosophical viewpoint which could be said to be the opposite of materialism, which denies the existence of matter and says that only mental events exist. This is called idealism (nothing to do with ideals, I hasten to add). This is not a very popular viewpoint these days but I give it for the sake of completeness. It may be said, however, that adoption of the idealist viewpoint also simplifies our categories, because psychokinesis, as an influence on matter, no longer exists. Only the mental world becomes important, and in that case we are left simply with ESP—extrasensory influences on mind.

The school of thought that says that *both* mental *and* physical events exist—for example, there are brains and there are the minds that interact with them—is called dualism, (though it must be pointed out parenthetically that there are many variants of the dualistic viewpoint, into

which we need not go in this exercise). With dualism we are back to square one with both ESP and PK and the various situations where either (or conceivably both) could be the operating principle in a paranormal event. It is probably true to say that the majority of parapsychologists are dualists, though it would be helpful to have survey data on this point. Therefore, the question of terminological purity can be raised for a great many parapsychological enterprises.

An alternative point of view is that the distinction between ESP and PK is unnecessary and indeed unreal (Storm & Thalbourne, 2000): the paranormal involves not two processes but one. At this juncture the theory of psychopraxia comes in. "Psychopraxia" comes from two Greek words, "psyche", meaning "soul", or as I prefer to translate it, the "self" or "ego" (in the non-egotistical sense), plus the word "prattein", which means "to accomplish". So "psychopraxia" means "the self accomplishing". The self is meant to be something apart from either the mind or the body. The self is not defined further than that it is inclusive of the "I"—the common denominator of all experience and the agent of all action (this description allows for the additional agency of the unconscious component of the self).

Instead of talking about the whole gamut of wishes, goals, needs, intentions, predispositions, etc., I have decided to talk instead about "pro attitudes". A person may be said to have a pro attitude towards X when they would prefer X rather than the absence of X if those two alternatives were to be brought to their attention. Thus, a person has a vision of their son at the moment of the son's death at sea. The person presumably does not have a pro attitude towards the death, but they may well have a pro attitude to the receiving of *news* about the son's lot, especially if it helps cushion the blow of news later received by normal channels. The person would prefer to have the paranormal news rather than not have it. Note that the self is said to "adopt" or have about it a pro attitude.

Contrary to what some commentators have said, the paranormal is not another word for magic. In magic, the wish (or pro attitude) is present, and hey presto, the wished for result is at hand. The paranormal does not operate like a genie from a lamp. There are events, or circumstances, that have to prevail before the paranormal event comes about; (the conditions surrounding the ganzfeld might be said to be a tentative set). These we call "necessary conditions", and there is a whole group or series of them that have to occur after the pro attitude is adopted by the self before the given accomplishment can occur. That accomplishment can be in the so-called "mental" realm, or in the so-called "physical" realm—it does not matter. Psychopraxia is the name I have given to this process—this single, unitary operation. The theory of psychopraxia gives primacy to the self, and pictures it as "moving about the furniture" of mind—whatever that is—and

of the physical world—whatever that turns out to be, treating both as objects or collections of objects to be manipulated.

Psychopraxia theory goes further than this, and in so doing goes back in time to the theorising of Thouless and Wiesner (1947). I propose, as did they, that the self (what they called by the Hebrew letter “Shin”) interacts with its own mind and body in the same way that it interacts with mental and physical events on the external, paranormal level. That is, when I ask myself “What is today’s date?”, and the mental cogs are set whirring, and the correct answer comes out, “October 15th, 2000”, and when I will my index finger to move to a particular key on my keyboard, I am essentially doing the same sort of thing, namely, psychopractically accomplishing ends, in the one case in my own mental world, and in the other case in my personal physical world. There is no essential difference between the two actions: my self harboured a pro attitude—a preference, or picture of what I wanted accomplished—the necessary conditions were in place (such as appropriate information in the intellectual task; and available neural pathways to my finger), and thus the actions issued in accomplishment in accordance with the pro attitude. Change the necessary conditions—remove a vital piece of information from my mind, or paralyse a section of my neural network—then the pro attitude does not issue in accomplishment. We find out by exploration what we can and cannot achieve within our own mind-body complex. By exploration, too, we find out what we can and cannot achieve paranormally, that is to say, outside our own mind-body complex in the external world: we cannot yet achieve a lot! It is the task of parapsychology to uncover the conditions necessary to paranormal psychopraxia.

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