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## **Open Forum on Psychopraxia**

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Discussants: Colin Mitchell, Michael Thalbourne, and Lance Storm.

In our last issue, the Editor, Michael Thalbourne, published a paper called “Harvey Irwin’s *Introduction to parapsychology* (3rd edition): A reinterpretation in terms of the theory of psychopraxia” (Thalbourne, 2003b). This article gave rise to a series of e-mail communications from reader Colin Mitchell enquiring about various aspects of that theory. The discussions were so fruitful that we decided to share them with a wider audience, in statement and response format, as follows. We trust that our readers will be interested in this exchange, and be motivated to purchase the two books referred to in the Reference List for a more extensive discussion of the issues involved. But first we must re-cap the basic principles of the theory. The following is taken from Storm and Thalbourne (2000, pp. 280-281):

The theory emphasizes four elements involved in the task at hand, whether (again in deference to Thouless and Wiesner) it occurs endosomatically (within the body) or exosomatically (outside the body, thus equating with the traditional psi effect):

1. The self, which 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 additional agency of the unconscious component of the self).
2. The “pro attitude”: “A person may be said to have a pro attitude towards state S when they would prefer S rather than –S [not S] if those two alternatives were to be brought to their attention” (Thalbourne, in press-a). Under this heading fall goals, intentions, needs, and dispositions, be they conscious or unconscious. So-called “psi-missing” is thus conceived of as being the result of a pro attitude toward below-chance results. The self is said to “adopt” a pro attitude.
3. The set of necessary conditions mediating between the self with its pro attitude and the goal state.

4. The outcome (i.e., goal state or goal achieved) that is to be brought about, whether in the so-called mental sphere or in the physical sphere, is not considered relevant.

*Psychopraxia* is defined as:

a . . . principle underlying all interactions between the self, or ego, and the realm consisting of mental and physical events, whereby *under certain conditions* (as yet unspecified, but probably psychophysiological) the adoption of a pro attitude automatically results in its fulfilment in reality; psi is thus seen as a special instance of psychopraxia, being those manifestations of goal-achievement which are exosomatic rather than endosomatic, that is, which are not mediated by the normal sensory-motor apparatus. (Thalbourne, 2003a, pp. 99-100)

C. M.: I understand that the theory of psychopraxia is meant to be ontologically neutral and that there are three distinct elements called the self, the mind-body complex, and the external physical world. Is that so?

M. T.: Yes. However, to use the expression “mind-body complex” without further qualification *tends* to imply the philosophical position of Dualism (mental states exist and are separate from physical events). We might instead take the position of (Central State) Materialism and deny that mental events exist independently, apart from physical (in particular brain) events. In this case we should speak of the “mind”-body complex or “mind”-body complex and the rest of the physical world. And to complete the trio of ontologies we can have philosophical Idealism, and deny that physical events exist independently, apart from mental events. In this case we should speak of the mind-“body” complex, or mind-“body” complex and the rest of the mental world. Nevertheless, I tend to use the simple expression “mind-body complex” without scare-quotes and without Dualistic implications, but with the presumption that the phrase can be appropriately descriptive of any of the three philosophical ontologies.

C. M.: My first problem is what is the self? I accept that your theory does not attempt to answer that question but are you necessarily considering the self as an identity separate from the mind-body complex, or could the self be part of the mind?

M.T.: The theory *does* in fact try to answer the question of what is the self (Storm & Thalbourne, 2000, p. 280). In a more recent paper that is currently in the process of being published (Thalbourne, in press-b) I spend a considerable amount of space on the psychopractic concept of self. What I point out (but do not necessarily subscribe to) is that the word “self” means different things in different contexts. There is no *one* definition. For example, we seem to be considering the self to be the body in cases such as “I cut myself this morning while shaving”. At other times we are referring to the mind, as when we say “I am depressed”. And there are times when we appear to be referring to *both* mind *and* body, as when we say “I have low self-esteem”. But there is also a sense of “self” that refers to *neither* of these elements. I am referring to what is often called “pure consciousness”, or sometimes “being”. I would like to quote an extensive and highly relevant passage from the philosopher W. T. Stace (1961):

Suppose that one should stop up the inlets of the physical senses so that no sensations could reach consciousness. This would be easy in the cases of the eyes, nose, ears, and tongue. But although one can shut one's eyes and stop one's ears, one cannot in this literal manner stop up the sense of touch nor the organic sensations. However, they can be excluded from explicit consciousness. Every footballer knows that it is possible to receive a heavy blow or kick or even a fairly severe wound and to be wholly unaware of the fact because of the excitement of the game. Later on, the pain of the bruise or other injury will emerge into consciousness. If one wishes to say that at the moment of the hurt there is a sensation of pain in the unconscious, that is perhaps a possible manner of speech. But there was at any rate no feeling of pain in *consciousness*. Hence there seems to be no *a priori* reason why a man [sic] bent on the goal of the mystical life should not, by acquiring sufficient concentration and mental control, exclude all physical sensations from his consciousness.

Suppose that, after having got rid of all sensations, one should go on to exclude from consciousness all sensuous images, and then all abstract thoughts, reasoning processes, volitions, and other particular mental contents; what would there be left of consciousness? There would be no mental content whatever but rather a complete emptiness, vacuum, void. One would suppose *a priori* that consciousness would then entirely lapse and one would fall asleep or become unconscious. But the introvertive mystics—thousands of them all over the world—unanimously assert that they have attained to this complete vacuum of particular mental

contents, but that what then happens is quite different from a lapse into unconsciousness. On the contrary, what emerges is a state of *pure* consciousness—“pure” in the sense that it is not the consciousness *of* any empirical content. It has no content except itself... When the self is not engaged in apprehending details it becomes aware of itself. The self itself emerges... The empirical ego is the stream of consciousness. The pure ego is the unity which holds the manifold of the stream together. (pp. 85-87)

When I talk of self, this is the prime concept that I have in mind. However, in everyday life, outside of deep yoga meditation, the self tends to be found commingled with the mind and with the body: in that commingled state it is the living percipient, and agent of action. L. S. (personal communication, 9th April 2004) refers to the self purely as the commingled state and wants to call this entire congeries “the self”, while I prefer to distinguish between the (commingled) doer and that which is done in the mind and in the body. At the same time, if I understand him correctly, L. S. appears to call the self-mind-body congeries “the personality”, and I have no objection to that, provided that we realize that the “body” component of the mind-body complex cannot (unless one is a resurrectionist) survive the process of death, nor may certain mental events (such as bodily sensations); that is, only a part of what L. S. calls “personality” may possibly survive death as a disembodied entity. He must also concede that the self in the commingled state may act not only on the external world, but also upon itself. L. S. (personal communication, 30th May 2004) finds that Stace’s use of the term “empirical ego” confusing—we can speak of either ‘ego’ or ‘empirical self’, and he thinks that “pure ego” is impossible, but he allows the phrase “pure consciousness,” which he alternatively regards as a *mental experience* (how could it be otherwise?) of the self—the “self-mind-body congeries” mentioned above.

C. M.: When I first read the definition of psychopraxis on [Thalbourne, 2003] page 107 I thought when I read “...interactions between the self...and the realm consisting of mental and physical events...” that you were implying a necessary distinction between the self, mental events and physical events, but since you are being ontologically neutral I assume that you are not doing this, as this would be a dualistic stance. Is that correct?

M. T.: This is an important point. When I say “ontologically neutral” it is because I am thinking of mind-body Dualism, Materialism and Idealism, all in competition with each other. I do not rule out other kinds of dualism, such as that between the self and the non-self (mind and matter). If that

means I fail to be completely ontologically neutral, then I would have to accept that verdict.

C. M.: I understand the idea of the pro attitude and that it is meant to refer to conscious or unconscious attitude (but I note in passing that this is not explicitly spelt out in your *AJPara* article [Thalbourne, 2003] on page 106 where you state “...where they would consciously prefer S rather than not-S *if* those two alternatives were to be brought to their attention...” but don’t mention unconscious—perhaps this could lead to misunderstanding in the reader—later in the article you do refer to unconscious pro attitudes.)

M. T.: Yes, but on the other hand I explicitly state in the definition “*if* those two alternatives were to be brought to the person’s attention”, as if to imply that in some cases of pro attitude the alternatives are not (yet) in consciousness, and are therefore unconscious without that word being used.

C. M.: Does the pro attitude arise in the self or in the mind it interacts with?

M. T.: I think the answer to this question is that the pro attitude is a mental entity which is “adopted” by the self. It does not arise in the self as pure consciousness but may arise in the empirical self (see above) as a result of interactions not only with the mind but with the body also (e.g., as fluid levels decline in the body the deficit leads to the mental event of thirst, which prompts the commingled self to adopt a pro attitude towards having a drink).

C. M.: As I understand it, endopsychopraxia is action which takes place according to normal understood physical laws and exopsychopraxia is paranormal action. I take it that “endo” and “exo” do not refer to spatial relations but merely to membership or non-membership of the mind-body complex (“the normal sensory-motor apparatus”).

M. T.: I believe that is correct, and expressed better than I have in the past. However, the Thouless-Wiesner Shin theory proposes that endo- and exo-actions are either *all* paranormal, or alternatively *all* normal—the so-called paranormal being exosomatic manifestations of processes that are normally endosomatic.

C. M.: I also see that you are not concerning yourself with whatever physical mechanism is involved in macro-PK or any other paranormal phenomenon: with this theory [of psychopraxia] you are just establishing

relations between the self, a pro attitude and normal or paranormal events (actions). However, you do mention that certain conditions are necessary for the action to take place and say they are probably physiological. What about the possibility of necessary conditions also in the surrounding environment, e.g. physical force fields such as magnetic, electromagnetic, gravitational or features of the physical world as yet undiscovered? In short, non-biological conditions. Shouldn't they also be included?

M. T.: I agree with this point without any reservations, except the experimenter could not take into account "features of the physical world as yet undiscovered"! I stated that the conditions were *probably* psychophysiological, but I did not want thereby to rule out other types of condition.

C. M.: Seems to me that the basic innovation of your theory is to say that the same psychological drives and motivations that cause our normal physical behaviour cause paranormal behaviour. Then also you are saying that ESP and PK are the same phenomenon. But it seems to me that under the ontology "Dualism" (which I'm not arguing for) ESP and PK are distinct or at least could be distinct (if mind stuff could communicate with mind stuff without the intermediary of matter). PK would involve an interaction between mind stuff and matter whereas telepathy could involve just mind stuff without interacting with matter... But Dualism is just about dead in the water anyway with both science and modern philosophy. It is just too difficult to see how anything non-physical could interact with the physical.

M. T.: I think your first statement about the innovativeness of my theory is wrong. But your second statement is correct: I *do* try to eliminate the categories ESP and PK in favour of a single, unitary phenomenon (called "psychopraxia"). Of course Dualism permits the two original phenomena without reduction, but the point of my Monograph (Thalbourne, in press-a) is to show that we are not stuck with Dualism's ESP/PK dichotomy but rather have monistic alternatives like Central State Materialism and Idealism (see Storm & Thalbourne, 2000). My innovation is in construing normal and paranormal achievements as actions which have as their causal antecedent a pro attitude held by the commingled self—a viewpoint which is consistent with all three ontologies.

C. M.: I notice [Thalbourne, 2003, p. 108] that "psychopractic theory also does not allow for precognition or retrocognition, preferring instead mental extrapolation from information available in the present" (super-psi). I

assume this is because of parsimony? But I don't see why it is necessarily parsimonious to assume super-psi rather than real precognition. On the contrary, super-psi seems really outrageous myself, and I find it easier to believe in glimpses of the future. Time is still a mystery in physics and we don't understand it yet, but we have lost the rigid ideas we used to hold about it in the past. It is now regarded as a less absolute and more flexible thing.

M. T.: The correct reason for not accepting precognition yet is not issues of parsimony but simply because the parent theory, Thouless and Wiesner's Shin theory, was unable to explain precognition, and therefore I have been unable to accommodate it in psychopractic theory. At the same time I believe I have experienced instances of super-psi in my life, and can no longer doubt that it occurs (see Thalbourne, in press-c). However, I do not wish to be dogmatic about precognition; the evidence for it may well persuade me at some time in the future.

C. M.: On page 113 you point out that "the extrapolatory approach [to precognition] is more able to deal with the so-called intervention paradox..." But this can also be explained with multiple futures—one interpretation of quantum mechanics is the "Many Worlds Interpretation". There are ways around the intervention paradox.

M. T.: I for one am unfamiliar with these alternative ways of dealing with the intervention paradox. The "Many Worlds Interpretation" does not sound very parsimonious. You would do *AJPara* readers a service by writing a short article on this topic.

C. M.: Another question I have arises from the discussion about apparitions (Thalbourne, 2003, p. 118). According to Irwin few people are thinking about the referent person at the time they have the apparitional experience. This leads me to ask whether all exo-psychopraxia is necessarily based on a pro attitude. If there is some kind of ability where people can pick up a residual energy or "memory" in haunted locations then can this be regarded as a passive paranormal sensory activity?

M. T.: This is an important issue. Regarding apparitional experiences, Colin is completely overlooking my response, so I quote it again: "This suggests either an unconscious pro attitude towards having an experience of that [referent] person [if asked consciously, I would prefer to have an apparitional experience of X rather than not have it], or perhaps psychopractic agency on the part of that referent person, living or deceased"

(p. 118). Thus, pro attitudes have by no means been ruled out. (If they *were* ruled out, then this would certainly count as a falsification of psychopractic theory.) The second case, about haunted houses is more difficult to answer, for lack of information. Is there a medium present who is picking up this “energy”? If so, she or he can be said to have a pro attitude towards picking up “vibes”, and consciously or unconsciously seek them. In locations where the paranormal activity is unwelcome—as happens in a number of poltergeists—one still has to rule out the pro attitudes of the focal person (who may be engaged in passive aggression), or even, heaven forbid, the pro attitude of a discarnate entity.

C. M.: If you are walking around and you happen to walk past a stobie pole, can you be said to have a pro attitude towards seeing a stobie pole? It just happens to be there. Or do you then say that you have a pro attitude towards keeping your eyes open so that you can see what is around you and not bump into things? That seems to be stretching the concept of pro attitude pretty far. The normal senses operate virtually automatically and are “on” all the time. We don’t have to have a pro attitude to decide to turn our senses on... What if some people just happen to have their paranormal radar sense on and pick up things by accident?

M.T.: This is a very good and important set of questions, and I’m glad you raised it. In the case of the stobie pole as described I would say no, you don’t have to have a pro attitude towards seeing the stobie pole to see it. It just happens to be in your sights. But what is true I think is to postulate—as Colin does in the “keeping your eyes open” example—that we do have a pro attitude towards having visual experience—never mind what objects happen to loom up in that experience. And at day’s end, we want to go to sleep, and no longer have the ongoing (almost automatic) pro attitude for visual experience and we close our eyes in order to accomplish the goal of sleep. A pro attitude is an attitude, not a conscious decision. One could say similar things about hearing. We can be said to have a general pro attitude towards auditory experience, but yet not hear all the things we want or expect: I may turn on my CD player to produce lovely music, but am assailed by the loud, unexpected crash of a thunder bolt. If we didn’t have a pro attitude towards hearing things, we would stuff up our ears with plugs. Colin says I am “stretching the concept of pro attitude pretty far”, but I think not. The viewpoint of perception as action (rather than as passive reception) is described more fully in my Monograph (Thalbourne, in press-a). It means taking a somewhat more global view of the operation of the senses. If the concept of pro attitude is inapplicable to these cases, then psychopraxis theory is falsified.



Thank you, Colin, for an extremely thoughtful and thought-provoking critique.

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Another researcher with whom I have had discussions about the theory of psychopraxia is Dr. Chris Roe, who works at University College Northampton, England. His comments arise from a reading of a preview copy of the Monograph (Thalbourne, in press-a).

C. R.: I claim that psi-cognition is more like memory than perception. Psychopraxia theory seems to imply that psi-cognition is like ordinary sense-perception. If psi-cognition is more like memory than perception, then wouldn't that undermine your conceptualisation?

M. T.: I have two answers to this. First of all, sense-perception depends in part on the operation of memory, and therefore memory would (somewhat indirectly) be involved in psi-cognition. Second, Adrian Parker (2000) writes "The analysis of the content ...strongly suggests that psi functions in a way similar to that of other sensory modalities during periods of reduced information input" (p. 65). On p. 79 he lists no fewer than 5 references in support of the statement that "There are also several previous findings supporting this similarity between the ways in which information in normal perception and in psi-perception is processed before it reaches consciousness." Those articles are Irwin (1978a, 1978b); Kelly, Kanthamani, Child & Young (1975); McMoneagle (1997); and Roll & Persinger (1998). So what is the evidence for the pure memory hypothesis?

C. R.: I am very intrigued by the notion of psychopraxia and the reformulation of the "problem" that parapsychology deals with, whereby paranormal and normal interactions are redefined as endo and exo expressions of similar processes. It could be a useful theory in making reasonably clear predictions about the natures of both. However, if psi is diasomatic [i.e., operates inside and outside the mind-body complex] (well, phenomenologically and perhaps teleologically), then wouldn't we expect it to share more features with other sensory and motor systems, most particularly in being mediated by the nervous system and having identifiable sense organs or motor systems?

M. T.: I would argue against this position, on the grounds that similar effects may have drastically different causes. Phenomenologically we may experience sense-data, but they may result from normal perception,

paranormal perception, vivid dreams, vivid imagination, or even hallucination. All of these processes surely have different causal antecedents.

C. R.: If the point of similarity is shifted back to, say, the point of linkage between shin and body-brain then how amenable to scientific investigation is that?

M. T.: This may or may not be a problem depending on how we conceptualise “shin”—the self—from a dualistic, materialistic or idealistic viewpoint. For dualists it is exceptionally difficult.

C. R.: I do worry about this distinction between self and mind, which still seems to me to be based (in part) on a syntax error (semantic if you like) in overinterpreting the use of terms such as “my body” and “my mind” as suggesting that these are therefore possessions of another entity, namely, one’s self. This smacks of a Cartesian Theatre scenario or observing homunculus that separates the experiencer from the experienced. I feel comfortable in using language like “changing my mind” without truly believing that my mind is distinct from myself, it is simply a means of describing one aspect of that self.

M. T.: I refer Chris to the quote from Stace earlier in this forum. I find the notion of a “detachable” self contemplating itself to be much more amenable to people who have meditated many years (31 years in my case). In a forthcoming article in the *Paranormal Review* (Thalbourne, in press-d) I discuss a number of different definitions of the “self”, but stick to the one in which pure consciousness has become commingled in the mind and body.

C. R.: Surely it is an overstatement to say that all action and perception causes (in the “necessary conditions” sense) desirable states (S over not S)? I can see that much action is volitional in that sense, but can’t accept that the same is true for perception. Clearly the latter is processed in a heavily top-down manner, but that’s not to say that it’s determined by desirable states.

M. T.: It is becoming a common theme to deny what psychopraxia theory claims—that perception is a form of action. The desirable state, or pro attitude, in vision is not a desire to see X, but to see anything, that is, to have visual experiences. Did we not have a pro attitude towards this we

would close our eyes as we do when beholding something horrific (in which case the desirable state is not to see at all).

L. S.: In the case of, say, an optical illusion, the pro attitude to see what constitutes the so-called 'illusion' is successful, and therefore the illusion is seen. Thus we may, more generally, have limited control of the *content* of visual experience, giving rise to the sense that it is non-volitional. A pro attitude *not* to see the 'illusion' will therefore not be effective and it will seem as if there is no pro attitude whereas we still have the general pro attitude towards visual experience.

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