

Correspondence

November 1, 2009

To the Editor:¹

I understand parapsychology to be the attempt to study in a scientific fashion claims for paranormal phenomena, such as extrasensory perception (ESP), mind over matter or psychokinesis (PK), and life after death. These claimed phenomena are also known as “psi”, from the first letter of the Greek word “psyche”. As such I do not include claims made for astrology, UFOs, or extraordinary life forms, which may come under the broader heading of anomalistic psychology.

I first became interested in psi as a final-year high school student in the throes of a religious crisis where I was wrestling with the truth or otherwise of Catholicism. It seemed to me at the time an extraordinarily vital issue to know whether there was a soul, and an afterlife, and a God. Parapsychology seemed to me to be a way of scientifically dealing with these issues, and I wrote about its relevance in philosophy essays on the mind-body problem at the University of Adelaide. Then, in my Honours year, 1976, I had the opportunity to conduct my thesis in part on a parapsychological topic, and I chose the hypothesis that closeness of relationship enhances telepathic communication. This hypothesis failed to be supported, but an attitude questionnaire given at the same time correlated strongly with measures of psi performance. Against the warning of my Ph.D. supervisor in Edinburgh, Dr. John Beloff, who cautioned that my career prospects would be jeopardized if I went on with parapsychology, I spent the next four years following up my Honours thesis results with, it must be said, a modicum of success. By the time I had my Ph.D. not one but two laboratories sought my services, and for the next four years I was happily and gainfully employed. So why, then, have I come to the point where I feel I must part company with parapsychology?

A turning point came in January 1983. Prior to that date the lab at which I had been working, the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research at Washington University in St. Louis, had been investigating two young men who claimed to be able to perform various acts of

¹ This email letter to me from Michael Thalbourne, though it went into limited circulation back in 2009, was kept relatively private due to the sensitive nature of some of its contents (on that account some editing was deemed appropriate). With his passing, I feel it is fitting to publish this abridged letter now for the simple reason that it contains much relevant autobiographical material that complements the above obituaries to Michael. I believe readers will appreciate my sharing Michael's correspondence with them for that reason.—EDITOR.

psychokinesis. The research started as relaxed and informal at first, leading up to tightly controlled formal experimentation. In the month stated, the magician James Randi announced at a press conference that the boys were amateur magicians sent to test the defenses of the MacLab. By widespread and artful manipulation of the media, Randi managed to convey the impression that we had been thorough-going incompetents, and no amount of pleading on our part seemed capable of reversing this viewpoint. Consequently we lost our funding, and the lab closed in 1985. The vehement opposition to the “hocus-pocus” of parapsychology had taken its toll, when critics went out of their way to sabotage research efforts. Note that no fraud was uncovered in the MacLab staff—only that put there by Randi.

So I was forced by unemployment to return to Australia, where I landed a job teaching psychology and doing some research in parapsychology. But this brings me to my second major theme, and that is the difficulty of obtaining significant results in a fair proportion of parapsychological experiments. Enormous efforts are expended for what often turn out to be nonsignificant results. Or enormous efforts are expended to salvage nonsignificant results by hunting through the data for *something* significant to report, going under the catch-all phrase of *post hoc*. It seems as true now as it has ever been that parapsychology does not have a repeatable effect—all its problems would be solved if it did. Now it must be said that other sciences, most notably psychology, have problems with predictability and repeatability, but their claims are not on the cosmic level made by parapsychology. It is also true that parapsychology has made advances by using the technique of meta-analysis, but it seems likewise true to say that it is a long way from stating in advance which experiments are likely to succeed and which will fail.

Talk of cosmic claims brings us to metaphysical issues, and that is the extreme implausibility of the likelihood of parapsychology succeeding. Conventional science views the world as a system of interacting physical energies, and mind as confined in its action to the brain and nervous system. The notion that mind can bypass these physiological functions and ‘reach out’ to obtain information about distant events, or influence distant objects, or even exist apart from the brain, flies in the face of two centuries of Enlightenment thinking. It is perhaps no wonder that traditional science pours scorn and ridicule on the heterodox assumptions of the parapsychologists.

In summary, I have decided, with some regret, to leave the company of my fellow parapsychologists, at least for the time being until the field is in better shape with respect to finances, repeatability, and academic standing. Should developments warrant it, I would be willing to return to the fold. But I think big changes need to occur before that happens.

—Michael A. Thalbourne

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November 3, 2009

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your letter. I think the rift between parapsychology and the other disciplines is socially constructed and has no real bearing on what we claim at a cosmic level, or whatever else we are trying to achieve. Take one of the ‘hardest’ sciences we know; Physics. I think physicists make very “cosmic level” claims. Many of these can’t be proved, nor do they have any real-world applications, but many people go on believing them as if they were religious tenets. Furthermore, physicists get it wrong all the time, and there’s still no consensus on what gravity is. In other disciplines, biologists can’t draw the line between living and non-living; mathematicians appeal to axioms as if they were laws carved in stone, but attempts at proving them end in contradiction.

I think it’s a moot point whether parapsychology “is a long way from stating in advance which experiments are likely to succeed and which will fail” (though the meta-analyses suggest otherwise), but as you also say, failure to predict is true for other disciplines. Anyway, without a study of other disciplines’ success rates, it is unfair to present parapsychology as if it were the dumbest kid in the class. I think parapsychologists can only help the discipline grow by everyone hanging on and working as best they can under less than favourable conditions.

—Lance Storm

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To the Editor:

Volume 9, Number 2 of *Australian Journal of Parapsychology* has just reached me. It is an impressive issue!

—Stanley Krippner

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