

THE CHALLENGE OF PRECOGNITION

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Of all the mind-boggling phenomena reported in the literature of parapsychology perhaps the most mind-boggling are those customarily characterized as precognitive. Dr. D. J. West was surely representing a majority reaction when he wrote: ". . . precognition—foreseeing arbitrary events in the future that could not by any stretch of the imagination be inferred from the present—that is something which is almost impossible for our minds to grasp. How can anyone see things which do not yet exist?"¹

I am going to begin by urging that the supposed descriptions that we are most inclined to apply to these phenomena are indeed impossible descriptions; although that is, of course, no reason at all for denying that such phenomena can and do actually occur. I certainly do not propose to put myself in the position of those professors of philosophy whom Galileo ridiculed in a letter to his colleague Kepler:

Oh, my dear Kepler, how I wish that we could have one hearty laugh together! Here at Padua is the principal professor of philosophy, whom I have repeatedly and urgently requested to look at the moon and the planets through my glass, which he pertinaciously refuses to do. Why are you not here? What shouts of laughter we should have at this glorious folly? And to hear the professor of philosophy at Pisa labouring before the Grand Duke with logical arguments, as if with magical incantations, to charm the new planets out of the sky.²

What I shall suggest is impossible is, instead, not the phenomena themselves, which can be described in theoretically neutral ways, but, rather, such tempting notions as that of a fairly literal foreseeing of things that do not yet exist.

From there I shall go on to argue that precognitive psi is implicitly so specified as to preclude the possibility of explanation. If what actually happens can be adequately accounted for in terms of causes and of laws of nature, then that by itself is sufficient to show that what we are

dealing with is not, after all, that authentic precognitive psi phenomenon that we thought we had discovered. If this second contention is correct, then attempts to excogitate a scientific theory embracing precognitive psi must be rather like some Lewis Carroll hunt for a married bachelor; whenever a married man is captured we find that he is, by the same token, a bachelor no longer.

Finally, I shall suggest that it is unsatisfactorily arbitrary to maintain that these difficulties must be met by insisting that what had been thought of as precognitive psi must somehow be redescribed in terms of other marginally less mind-boggling psi phenomena. If we are to put any trust in the evidence for the former—and it is hard to see how we can refuse to do so unless we are prepared to reject that for the latter also—then it would seem that we should have to postulate for any such alternative descriptions other sorts of psi ongoings of a power and on a scale far beyond anything for which we have good independent evidence.³ It is less arbitrary to try to treat all these other sorts of psi phenomena as nearly as possible in the same way, by asking whether scientific explanation is not somehow or other precluded too. If this is indeed the truth, then the truth is most disagreeable. It very often is.

While I feel some confidence in the first and in the second of these three suggestions, I am, and no doubt should be, extremely shy about the third. Yet—nowithstanding that this contrives remarkably to combine in approximately equal parts both recklessness and defeatism—it is nevertheless a thesis that deserves to have some airing at the present conference. Maybe it is false or in some other way misguided. But certainly it is one theoretical possibility with which we have somehow to come to terms.

In the case of precognitive psi the contention is that the phenomenon "is implicitly so specified as to preclude the possibility of explanation." If this is correct, then explanation is here necessarily impossible. The contention with regard to the other kinds of psi must be, rather, that the material conditions of explanation are not in fact satisfied. If this is correct, then in these cases explanation is not necessarily but contingently impossible. To understand this contention what we have to recognize is that there are no a priori guarantees, either that all phenomena can be subsumed under universal laws of nature, or that all sorts of occurrences have their appropriate causally sufficient conditions. For it is theoretically possible to have exceptions to what are no doubt the general rules. Not only may we in some particular case never in fact discover what the regularities are under which all the phenomena could be subsumed, or what are the causal conditions sufficient for their occurrence, but there may also be phenomena that just

are not instances of universal lawful regularities, and of which there are no causally sufficient conditions.

In other fields we usually have the a posteriori support of discoveries already made: where some laws and some causal connections are known, this knowledge constitutes some inductive reason to believe that there are further regularities waiting to be discovered. This is precisely not the situation in our own fascinating yet frustrating field. For despite all the vast labors of these many years we still have no sure recipe for a repeatable demonstration of any parapsychological phenomenon. On the contrary, experienced psychical researchers would be inclined to take the twice nightly reliability of some allegedly telepathic or psychokinetic stage act as by itself sufficient reason to conclude that the performance could not be what it was pretending to be.

In other fields again there is usually some more or less comprehensive working hypothesis offering a more or less adequate explanation of the phenomena under investigation. Even where there is no such generally accepted tentative theory or working hypothesis we expect to be able to indicate the sort of theory that we are looking for, and even to suggest something that would have done if only the facts had been a bit different from what it now seems they are. But for the kind of clairvoyance apparently required for successful guessing down through a pack of cards, or for the effective direction of psychokinetic forces against collections of dice being rolled in cages, no one seems to have anything much to contribute. And no wonder!

Taken together these two peculiarities of the parapsychological field constitute some positive reason to entertain a scandalous but not contradictory suggestion. That correlations are statistically significant does not entail that they do in fact result from lawful regularities and causal connections. So it must be at least theoretically possible that in this area such correlations are not, as elsewhere they almost always are, reliable pointers to the subsistence of such universal regularities and connections. Perhaps, therefore, the reason why no one has succeeded in producing a recipe for a repeatable demonstration is that there just are no generally sufficient conditions for the occurrence of psi phenomena.

Having thus raised a strong stench of scandal to come I turn now to my first two, more innocent, points. Confronted by accounts of precognitive psi phenomena we all, I think, find it almost irresistibly tempting to suggest that the fulfillments must somehow be causing the anticipations. Yet this cannot be correct. Since anticipations necessarily occur before their fulfillments, the latter must always arrive too late to play any part in the production of the former. If a fulfillment was go-

ing to be the cause of its own anticipations it would have to be possible to prevent such anticipations by preventing their fulfillments. But once the anticipations have occurred they have occurred, and it must be too late either to prevent or to produce them by preventing or producing their fulfillments. The notion of backwards causation presupposes the possibility of altering the necessarily unalterable past. It is, therefore, radically absurd.⁴

It is this radical absurdity that is projected onto the facts when we speak of precognitive psi in either of the two ways most favored: either, that is, as some sort of fairly literal perception of the future; or as a new kind of remembering—"remembering forwards."⁵ For it is part of what is meant by "perception" and by "remembering" that what is perceived or remembered must be a causal condition of its being perceived or being remembered. Suppose that we were able to confront a blind man with a Rembrandt, and suppose too that by the manipulation of electrodes we were able to give him the same visual experience that we have when we can see that Rembrandt. It would, surely, still be incorrect to claim that we had enabled him truly to see that painting; and not merely—in warning and qualifying inverted commas—to "see" it.

Take memory next. Suppose that someone comes up with a lot of correct information about what happened long ago, information that he himself perhaps claims to be a part of his own remembrances of things past. Suppose too that he was not in fact even alive at the time of whatever it was to which all this information refers, and that his now producing it is not either directly or indirectly a result of any exercise in historical reconstruction either by himself or by another informant. It must still, surely, be wrong to say that the subject remembered what had happened before he was born. This description is ruled out by the very fact that it did happen before he was born. He could not for this reason have had the necessary personal contacts with whatever it was. It could not have played its essential part in producing the memory traces, whatever these may be. These various suppositions actually do, together, specify a paradigm case. But it is a paradigm case not of conventional memory but of retrocognitive psi.

Someone who has taken the points made so far may nevertheless believe that all that is called for is some appropriate revision of our traditional notions of causality. "Yes," he might reply, "no doubt it would be—given the present established meanings of such words as *cause* and *effect*—contradictory to speak of causes working backwards, or of effects produced before the occurrence of their causes. But new discoveries demand new ideas. So perhaps we need to introduce a new

idea of psi cause, exactly the same as the old concept of cause except for the removal of the previous restriction on temporal direction."

It is important to appreciate why this will not work. For certainly there are occasions for this sort of conceptual flexibility. However, to do what is here proposed would be not to bend but to break the concept cause. For it is only inasmuch as causes either precede or are simultaneous with their effects that we can without absurdity speak of the former as bringing about the latter. But that causes do thus bring about their effects and that effects are thus brought about by their causes are two complementary essentials of these two complementary notions. And that we can employ knowledge of what, in fact, causes what either to bring about or to prevent possible consequences is what makes our causal knowledge both possible and useful. For unless somewhere along the line some experimental tests had been made we could scarcely claim that any beliefs we might have about causes merited the diploma title "knowledge"; while it is precisely and only because causes are—in the sense explained—levers that our knowledge of what causes control what is useful knowledge.

It therefore appears that any attempt to amend the traditional notion of cause on the lines indicated will be either not drastic enough or else far too drastic. If the changes are not drastic enough we shall generate radically absurd implications about the possibility of manipulating future psi causes in order to undo what has already happened. If, on the other hand, our reconstruction is so thorough as to ensure that talk about psi causes carries no such untoward implications, then what we shall have produced will be not a revised but a pseudo-concept of cause. For a cause that necessarily could not produce effects would no more be a cause than a nonexistent man could be a man or a non-empirical experience could be an experience.

If this is right, as it surely is, then my own earlier hesitant attempts to sketch some suitably revised concept of cause must have been misconceived.⁶ I also think now that similar attempts to amend the notion of a law of nature were correspondingly misguided. The heart of the matter is that to state a law of nature is to say more than that two variables in fact always have been and in fact always will be perfectly correlated. A law statement states also and essentially that these variables are connected by a contingent necessity; and this in turn implies that the correlation in question would have obtained in the past, and in the future would still obtain, despite any attempts that might have been or might be made to break it. But it is precisely this essential element that has to be excised in order to produce the new notion of a psi law.⁷

Suppose that we discover that certain kinds of subjects, under such and such conditions, always or to such and such an extent above mean chance expectation, correctly anticipate the value of future randomized targets. Then either it is or it is not possible, after the anticipations have been recorded, to prevent the production of the proposed targets. If it is not, then that is a reason for saying that the recording of the anticipations is a causally necessary condition for the occurrence of the fulfillments; and whatever else we should or should not say about this, this causal relation is certainly sufficient to disqualify the candidate from rating as a case of precognitive psi. But if it is possible to prevent the production of the targets, then the psi law that states that the correlation between the anticipations and the targets will obtain if, but only if, nothing is done to dispense with the targets is a law of nature only in name.

So much for my first contention, that the descriptions which we are all most inclined to apply to supposed cases of precognitive psi are fundamentally absurd. My second contention concerns the possibilities of explanation. Consider the requirements that have to be satisfied in order to qualify as precognitive psi. To start with we must have statistically significant correlations between what people do or say or experience at one time and what goes on later. But though necessary such statistically significant correlations are obviously not sufficient.

There are, no doubt, spectacularly significant correspondences between what shrewd and honest men say that they will do and what these men later actually do. But no one wants to talk of psi here. It is essential that the fulfillment thus psi precognized should not be brought about either by the anticipator or by his anticipation thereof.

Often, again, people can and do know that something will happen. They possess materials from which this may be inferred as a conclusion. But foreknowledge based thus upon inference is for that very reason disqualified here. The paradoxical consequence is that precognitive psi cannot as such be a form of knowledge; although if a subject did know that he was endowed with precognitive psi capacity, and if he were able to pick out his own hits at the time when he made them, then he might properly appeal to these facts as grounds for claims to know certain things about the future that he could not have known otherwise.

A third requirement is less obvious and more tricky. Suppose we found a phenomenal correspondence between the guesses made earlier by the subject and targets determined later not randomly but by the agent's own choice, and suppose that this correspondence was the result of their both having inherited or acquired similar patterns of guessing

and choosing dispositions, then this latter fact would certainly be sufficient to disqualify the former correspondence from rating as a case of precognitive psi. It is partly in order to prevent such disqualification by reference to some common causal ancestry that experimenters insist that targets must be randomly selected not only in precognitive but in all psi experiments.

But now, if we put these three requirements together with what was said before about backwards causation and psi laws, then it becomes clear that there cannot be any explanation of precognitive psi as such.⁸ For, if a statistically significant correlation between, say, A's and F's is to indicate a causal connection between A's and F's, then, either A's must cause F's, or F's must cause A's, or both A's and F's must be partly or wholly caused by some third thing; and there is no fourth alternative. But here the fulfillments cannot cause the anticipations, since the latter must already have occurred before the former begin; while the first and the third requirements just specified rule out the possibilities, respectively, that the anticipations help to produce the fulfillments, and that both anticipations and fulfillments are somehow the work of common causal ancestors.

If this conclusion is correct, then we have three choices: either the evidence for precognitive psi does not prove any psi at all; or else it does, but the sort or sorts involved are not really precognitive; or else it does show the reality of genuine precognitive psi, but the statistically significant correlations between the "anticipations" and the "fulfillments" are not here signs of the presence of real connections between the phenomena so correlated. Since I can see no acceptable way of defending the first option, and because—as I have suggested already—the second seems to require the postulation of other sorts of psi on a scale far beyond anything for which we have independent evidence, it seems that I have at least to take the scandalous third option seriously.

The moment that we do begin to treat it seriously we have to see whether, if we are going to take such a line about precognitive psi, we should not also take it about all or some of the other kinds too. One reason why we should not is that it is only precognitive psi that has been so specified as to preclude explanation. On the other hand, all the various sorts of psi phenomena do, at least as far as our present understanding goes, share certain significantly negative common characteristics.

For one thing, as was said earlier, we have no reliable recipe for the repeatable production of any of them. A second and much trickier point is one that I first tried to make twenty years ago.⁹ It is here re-

markable that despite all the work of the years between it still holds good. Not only is all the psi evidence evidence of statistically significant relationships between series, but the psi concepts themselves appear to be, in effect, equally statistical. For although people constantly talk of information being acquired by means of telepathy or by means of clairvoyance, no description of any means, however hypothetical, seems to have been built into the meaning of the terms. On the contrary, it is essential to the ideas of telepathy and clairvoyance that the performance to be described in these terms must not have been achieved by any means we can think of—inference from what is already known to the subject, conscious or unconscious cheating through the use of sensory cues and clues, and so on.

Although to say that it is all done by telepathy or by clairvoyance suggests that what we are dealing with is, and is known to be, on all fours with achievements compassed thanks to radar or to infrared photography. That this is so is at least not known to be true, and may therefore not be true at all. Not only is it wrong to assume that the terms *telepathy* and *clairvoyance* incorporate hypotheses about putative mechanisms, but there is no way of identifying telepathy or clairvoyance except by reference to statistically significant correlations occurring under appropriate conditions. While it makes good sense to say that they used their radar apparatus or their infrared cameras, but nevertheless failed to discover what they were looking for, no meaning has been provided for the parallel phrases in which psi terms substitute for the equipment expressions. *Telepathy* and *clairvoyance* are, therefore, not so much names for either methods or means or even capacities as words for distinguishing different conditions under which statistically significant correlations occur.

Of course it is always possible that discoveries will be made that will render all that I am saying here right out of date. But it is true now, and has been true for embarrassingly many years, that these terms do not incorporate any reference to any means; and that if they did, our evidence would no longer entitle us to claim that, in the new senses of the words, telepathic and clairvoyant psi are known to occur. It is also true now, and has been true for a similarly long period, that we have no means of identifying either without reference to the correlations that actually occur. Indeed no sense seems to have been given to the notion of such an identification.

Again and similarly, we have never had, and still do not have, any way of identifying which of the hits in a guess series were "achieved by the psi capacities of the subject," and thus separating these treasured parapsychological sheep from all the goatish riffraff of mean chance

expectation. And, as before, it would appear that no sense has been given to the notion of such identifications. At least as far as our present knowledge goes the phenomena of psi gamma just are the statistically significant correlations occurring in telepathic or clairvoyant conditions,¹⁰ rather than the achievement, by means unknown, of a few particular individual successes distinguishable from the more numerous pseudo-successes "due to chance."

The point applies not only to the quantitative experiments but also to the sporadic phenomena. For it is only insofar as the subject's performances are fairly complex and/or repeated quite frequently that we can have good reason to describe their correspondences with whatever it may be as a psi phenomenon. But even the single complex dream or whatever, constitutes in this context a series. It is only its correspondence in many respects with whatever it is that enables us to speak of a psi phenomenon. And, because any single correspondence may be one of those bound to occur "by the law of averages," we cannot even here pick out what is from what is not "due to psi."

NOTES

1. *Psychical Research Today* (London: G. Duckworth, 1954), p. 104.
2. Quoted in E. A. Burtt *Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932), pp. 66-67.
3. See, for instance, C. W. K. Mundle, "Does the Concept of Precognition Make Sense?" *Int. J. of Parapsychol.* 6 (1964): 179-198.
4. See M. Dummett and A. Flew, "Could an Effect Precede its Cause?" *Proc. Aristotelian Society* Supp. Vol. 28 (1954); also subsequent discussion in *Analysis* Vols. 16 and 17 (1955/56 and 1956/57).
5. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Ch. V.
6. *A New Approach to Psychical Research* (London: C. A. Watts, 1953), pp. 127-129.
7. See Part III (v) of my "Broad and Supernormal Precognition" in *The Philosophy of C. D. Broad*, edited by P. A. Schilpp (New York: Tudor, 1959); and compare the exchange with Dr. Michael Scriven in *Analysis*, Vol. 17 (1956/57). Points about laws of nature which are badly asserted in the text above are argued for in my *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), Ch. VI.
8. It is significant that when the ever acute Broad, in his *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), offered a theory he insisted: "It is extremely important to notice that, on this theory of 'precognition,' no event is ever 'precognized' in the strict and literal sense." (P. 80.)
9. *A New Approach to Psychical Research*, pp. 118 ff.
10. I say nothing in the text about psi kappa. The only point I have to add to my contribution to the discussion of "A Review of Psychokinesis" in the *International Journal of Parapsychology* (1964) pp. 179-198, is the suggestion that, if all attempts to achieve positive results in one shot tests continue to fail and if positive results in quantitative tests accumulate, then this will surely constitute some rather backhanded support for the defeatist suggestion sketched above.

DISCUSSION

BELOFF: I was listening all ears for really good grounds for saying this and the best grounds he gave was that you cannot manipulate a future event in order to change the present. And admittedly, this does make it a very different kind of cause from the one we have been traditionally using in science. I still think, in spite of his hasty denials in the last two seconds of his talk, that he has been misled in his thinking on these questions and, ever since he wrote his first book on this topic, by always taking as the paradigm examples the statistical, parapsychological experiment. I would like him, therefore, to consider, purely for the sake of argument, what he would say or do if I were to tell him that I had a subject who, quite regularly, even not infallibly, but regularly, frequently was able to tell me the headline I would read in tomorrow's *Times*. He can just throw up his hands and say this has never happened, we do not have to talk about it. Let us, nevertheless, think of this kind of situation. Here, how could one deny that my subject had knowledge of what I was going to read in tomorrow's *Times*? How could one deny that what was in tomorrow's *Times* was, in some sense (and we have got to make sense of it), was causing these frequent precognitions in my subject?

FLEW: I do not think one could deny it. Once he was in a position to have anticipated the next day's *Times* several times, and found that he could do it, then this regularity could provide him with a basis for claiming he could do it. Also, I take it that in this case, he is able to pick out his winners himself and distinguish them from the duds. Now, this represents two very important differences from all the cases so far, does it not?

BELOFF: I did not ask you to imagine that he always knows when he is going to be right or wrong. Let us just say that five days out of seven he gives me the right headlines for the *Times*. He does not know which ones are right or wrong, but he is doing it very frequently. This would pose this very question we have to ask: Did he have the knowledge, or did he not?

FLEW: If he is doing it fairly frequently, I think one can still rather cautiously talk of knowledge. After all, people can be said to have knowledge in a field where they sometimes make mistakes.

BELOFF: But I think it is important that he is, unlike all our actual cases, with some degree of reliability able to identify his winners and discriminate them from his losers, is it not?

FLEW: About the backwards causation, I do not see it affects the side issue at all.

BELOFF: You would not, in that situation, be inclined to say that what was in the paper was causing . . .

FLEW: I would be inclined to say that the temptation to say this or to talk about remembering performance is very strong. But as a temptation it has to be resisted because if there is that causation, it would imply that the past could be altered by the future.

MEERLOO: There are psychological phenomena which you cannot catch in experiments. In the first place, the function of anticipation—I am not talking about psi anticipation—is not very well investigated. We do it, it is a defense mechanism. Especially in sport, like tennis, we know beforehand where our opponent will go and where he will hit the ball. If we cannot do this sort of anticipating, we will lose the game. So obviously there is a subject that we call anticipation with which we have continually to deal in psychotherapy and psychiatry and psychology. Where does psi come in? Psi comes in when I can read what the other is anticipating. Many books have been written about these clinical facts, about this kind of prediction. Then there is something about the anticipating dreams, the predicting dreams. There is quite a literature on this subject. I myself dreamed the night before I was to be shot, how I could escape. The literature is full of these phenomena. The question is, could we verify it?

FLEW: This is an extremely bad example here, because, after all, you had a hand in the fulfillment of this particular prediction. I should have thought the obvious thing to say about this is that your mind was understandably engaged while you were asleep.

MEERLOO: There is a question of reasoning. You can turn reasoning down. You can upset everything. When I know that somebody is going to commit suicide and I go to his home, that means I have read something in his mind. That is something of daily life. Sometimes we make use of the possibilities, sometimes we do not. In this thing that we deny, we bypass all literature on it. We can also remember something we did not perceive. Charcot has already written about it. There can be a person who does not understand Latin, who passes someone who talks Latin and twenty years later he reproduces it. We call this cryptamnesia. This is a fact of psychology. A fact of psychology is also that some people can read in other people's minds what they are going to do. Of course, a psi factor comes in.

FLEW: I have to be sure. But it is misdescribed if it is described as memory. Just as my objection to precognitive cases is not that they do not occur, but that they are wrongly described as forms of seeing, because seeing carries implications that are clearly not applicable in these cases.

BRIER: I think you are committing a basic error when you say that if causes in the future can have effects in the present, this means that you can change the past. It does not. What it entails is that you can affect the past, which is different from changing the past. I will give you an example. It is true, for example, that if Napoleon lost at Waterloo, nothing I can do now will undo that. That would be changing the past. But affecting the past is a different case. That is, it might be true, a logical possibility, that the reason Napoleon lost the war at Waterloo was because of something I did in the future, such as telling Wellington what to do. Did you see the difference? You cannot change the future either. This does not show that a cause in the present cannot have an effect in the future. Changing the past and affecting the past are two different things. For instance, suppose we had a terrific ESP subject who could always guess the ESP card that you were going to pick the next day. Let us say you were told that he made his guess yesterday. Now you have to select a card and you are told that you will be given a million dollars if he guessed a circle. Now, is there anything you can do now to make him have guessed a circle? Yes, pull out a circle because he is 100% successful. You can manipulate future causes, and that would cause the effect in the past.

FLEW: But if he has already guessed a circle, there is no need for me to do anything but to sit back and arrange for the bankers to receive the biggest check they ever had.

BRIER: No, it might be the reason that he guessed a circle was because of something you will do. That is the issue.

FLEW: How can it be the reason why? That it is possibly redundant?

BRIER: It is not possibly redundant. We are only talking about cases where there is a correlation.

FLEW: What I think plays a role here is what I call the bilking aspect. Having already got his guess, I just want my money. I am not going to do anything with cards, I just want the money. But it is too late for you to stop me having it, because he has made the guess and I am entitled to it.