

## TOWARDS A VALIDATION OF PSI EXPERIMENTS

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FLEW: I shall try to tie my discussion onto what has been said before. What I actually want to talk about is repeatability. But I can best introduce this talk on repeatability by starting with two related distinctions we need very much to make.

The first is the distinction between two senses of the word *experience*: the notion of experience is Janus-faced. There is one sense in which, when you report your experience, you are making no claim about what is going on in the universe around you. Here, presumably, your honest testimony as to your experience genuinely is the last word. Let us qualify this as subjective experience.

Then there is another, a different sense, which I think is the everyday one. In this second sense when you talk about your experience, you are additionally making a claim about what goes on in the world. The temptation, to which people constantly succumb, is to think that they must also have the last word about the universe around them, because in their honest testimony they truly have got the last word about their subjective experience. To illustrate this first distinction, I will give two examples.

First, consider the notion of religious experience. In this field there is a great confusion of the two senses of *experience*. I may have the last word about some vision I had, if all I am claiming is what it looked like; if, for instance, I say I had a vision of the Blessed Virgin, meaning simply that my vision was something like the ordinary representations of her. But I do not have the last word if I am claiming that, because I did have this subjective experience, therefore the Mother of Jesus was in some way causally responsible for my having had it.

The second example, quite relevant here, is concerned with experiences under drugs. The person who has had the experience has the last word about the subjective quality of the experience. But please do not let anyone, sorcerer or otherwise, pretend that it was real objective flying which was produced by taking the drug.

Nothing I have said in explaining this first distinction should in any way be taken to discredit the study of subjective experiences. I do not want to discourage anyone from studying dream or drug experiences. But the people doing such studies will discredit themselves if they do not observe this first vital distinction.

Now we go to the second basic distinction, concerning "psi experiences." People studying certain fancy experiences may think that some of these can be properly characterized as psi experiences. Perhaps indeed they can. But if they can, it will not be by virtue simply and solely of their subjective quality. Anyone who wants to describe anything as a psi experience is not thereby avoiding the embarrassing question about the repeatability of experiments, nor is he demonstrating a certain sort of transfer of information. He is presupposing it. The only ultimate and authentic basis for describing any experiences, however interesting, however peculiar, as psi experiences is the thought that these experiences are in some way intimately connected with a special sort of transfer of information.

Recently, many people working in this field seem to have come to think that fruitful studies of interesting or unusual subjective experiences somehow just are studies of psi experiences. "How wonderful!" they appear to be assuming. "This will enable us to bypass altogether the difficult question as to whether any information has been paranormally transferred." But it will not. If you want to call these experiences psi experiences, this must be in virtue of your well grounded conviction that there is a genuine paranormal phenomenon of transfer of information. Furthermore, the experiences which you are studying must in some way be connected with this supposed transfer, in the way that LSD experiences are connected with taking an increasingly popular and common drug. Just as LSD experiences are so called not in virtue of their experiential quality, but in virtue of their causation, so psi experiences are so-called not in virtue of their peculiar subjective quality, but in virtue of their believed relationship with a special sort of transfer of information. Nothing must ever be allowed to distract parapsychology from the essential parapsychological question of whether such paranormal information transfer does occur; and, if so, why and how.

These remarks will serve as introduction and an excuse for going

back to the rather unpopular question of repeatability. I made this introduction because I wanted to bring up both these basic distinctions, and to point out that we will not evade the embarrassing question of psi repeatability by developing immediately exciting studies of the experiential quality of certain sorts of experiences which have not previously been much studied.

It is now thirty or so years since I first began to be interested in this subject, almost always from a theoretical point of view. But in these thirty years, despite many promising and new starts, the evidential situation has stayed fundamentally unchanged. It is a situation of tension. On the one hand there seems not to be one single repeatable phenomenon even of a statistical character. In this area, not only can you not say: "Do this under these conditions and this will happen," but you cannot even say: "Do this ten times, and five times out of ten this will happen." You have not even got a repeatable phenomenon of a statistical character. On the other hand it seems equally clear to me that there is altogether too much interesting and suggestive evidence for one to say with a good logical conscience: "Let us dismiss the whole thing, for it is a gigantic wild goose chase."

One reason for this lack of success is, of course, the same as the reason why we never find a bachelor who is married; as soon as the bachelor gets married, he is disqualified from being a bachelor. Similarly here: hypnosis, for instance, was regarded as a phenomenon pertaining to psychical research until it became clear that it was a genuine and repeatable phenomenon. Then, just for that very reason, it went over into the sphere of orthodox psychology. But I do not think this could be the case with all supposed parapsychological phenomena. Even if originally our field was defined rather negatively, it seems to me that most alleged phenomena have something positively in common. Hence this bachelors-never-marry story is not the whole answer.

So, now, why is it that we have to demand repeatability? I think there are two very obvious reasons; and a third, less obvious, on which I want to concentrate. The first reason is that it would be agreeable for parapsychologists to be able to show phenomena to people, saying: "Do this and you will see this." So that the only way to deny it would be by averting one's gaze and saying: "I do not like to believe that," in the way that people avert their gaze from uncongenial political and social phenomena. The second, and perhaps rather less commonly appreciated, reason is that one would not be dependent on personality variables. The present situation in psychical research is that often you have bits of work that at first sight look jolly impressive. But then, until

and unless they are repeated, you begin to wonder, as the years pass, whether the chap you had judged to be a hard-boiled experimenter really was the man you thought he was when he did the first work. (As the Old Pagan said of the Resurrection Story: "It was all a long time ago, and let us hope it never happened!") So long as we do not have repeatability, we are desperately dependent on the quality of people. This is always an unsatisfactory situation and it exposes us to a sort of evidential erosion by the sheer lapse of time. We cannot say, unless we have got a repeatable experiment, that questions about the individual experimenter do not matter. So long as his results are not repeatable, and are not repeated, these questions about him are crucial to the whole thing.

These are the two obvious reasons. The third reason, which is the one I want to emphasize specially, is that the notion of repeatability is logically linked with both the notion of cause and the notion of a law of nature. Supposing we have reason to believe that all As are in fact preceded by Bs, and that there are no Bs not followed by As, this by itself is not a sufficient reason for saying that As and Bs are lawfully related. The meaning of a statement of lawful connection is different from, and involves more than, a statement of mere constant conjunction.

Let me give an example, originally introduced in quite a different connection: the illustration of the two clocks. Suppose you were confronted by two ideal clocks, which never go wrong, which are both telling the same time, and which you know will be going for all eternity. You have here, by the hypothesis, a perfect 100 per cent correlation, because, for instance, every time one of the clocks tells four o'clock, the other one does, and in fact always has done and always will do. Now, no one believes that this in itself is enough to guarantee a causal connection. For in this case no one believes that if you smashed one clock, you would be sure that the other would stop.

What would we need to be sure that the clocks were causally connected? We would want to know precisely that if you were to smash one of them, this would affect the other. This example of the two clocks illustrates the inadequacy of mere statistical significance. For it constitutes, of intent, an ideal case of a 100 per cent correlation. Yet, obviously, this perfect correlation still does not necessarily guarantee a causal or lawful connection. What is wanted is some basis for the assurance that if you produce a B you will get an A, and if you have got a B there is nothing you can do to stop the A. What is wanted is some sort of experimental manipulation, showing that producing Bs is a reliable way of producing As, and that given Bs you cannot prevent

the occurrence of consequent As. For the whole notion of law is linked with the impossibility, given the sufficient cause, of stopping the effect. This is not only a notion of practical impossibility, but also one of inevitability. For granted the cause there is nothing anyone can do to stop the effect.

What I have been arguing here is that one must demand repeatability mainly for this third reason, which is connected with the whole nature of a scientific law. What one is demanding is some sort of guarantee that the connection is a real connection, that if you do this, that will happen, and if you stop this, you will stop that. Repeatability is not just something that old fashioned scientists would like to have for the first two reasons, although both are good reasons. It is more than that. If you do not have repeatability, you just do not have a basis for saying that you have a law, a real connection, an authentic natural phenomenon as opposed to some sort of fluke.

Now, finally, I want to mention repeatability in connection with history. I use the word history here to cover all knowledge of what actually happened in the past; not just political history, the story of the follies and crimes of mankind! If we are investigating what happened, say, in a spontaneous psychical research case, we presuppose all our knowledge (or what we believe to be our knowledge), not only of probabilities and improbabilities, but also of impossibilities and inevitabilities. We have to, inasmuch as we are trying to assess evidence critically. And how is this done, if not by appealing to presumed possibilities and impossibilities, probabilities and improbabilities?

If you are trying to establish some phenomenon which you believe to be inconsistent with what was previously believed to be a law of nature, you are going to have, to put it mildly, an intractable problem on your hands in establishing, on purely historical evidence, that on this single occasion something happened inconsistent with everything else that you believe about the world. I am not prepared to say that anything inconsistent with what you believe to be a law of nature has to be ruled out of all consideration on historical evidence, but I do suggest that you are in a very bad way evidentially if you want to show that something happened in the past which you cannot produce in the present.

MARGENAU: Thank you very much. Now, Mr. Ehrenwald will speak on motivations in psi research.