

## FRESH THOUGHTS ON PSI PHENOMENA

S. DAVID KAHN (*U.S.A.*)

Although I am by profession and major interest a psychiatrist, my remarks will reflect the point of view of an individual who has actively engaged in an experimental parapsychology for some years. I first would like to comment on some of the opening remarks bearing upon the failure of parapsychology to gain general acceptance among scientists at large. I think the evidence is against the argument that parapsychologists must make assumptions which are unpalatable to the rest of science. On the contrary, the parapsychologist is obliged to make fewer assumptions than any other scientist working at the present time in the more acceptable areas of research. A careful view of the present theoretical sub-structure of psi phenomena suggests that there are no intrinsic value systems involved. There should be little basis, therefore, for prejudice among scientists towards parapsychology any more than there should be prejudice among scientists against say gravitational phenomena, which also involves action at a distance.

Though I suppose you can still find an occasional scientist who is concerned by the absence of a physical medium through which gravitational force is expressed, the bulk of practicing scientists certainly do not find this perplexing, due to their positivistic orientation. If there is a value judgement to be made in parapsychology, it can only be the initial one of deciding to do work in the field. Since this is a personal decision made on non-scientific grounds, and must be an experience shared by every other scientist who devotes time to a given interest, it can be of little moment in this connection.

The most cogent reason why parapsychology has not been accepted is because, at this time, it cannot be accepted in a MEANINGFUL way. It is, by its present definition, a foreign body in the larger body of science, and has not been assimilated simply because it is presently indigestible. This sad fact is more a reflection of the data of parapsychology than it is a reflection of the failure of scientists to have developed, in anticipation of such extraordinary facts, the proper theoretical "enzyme" system for handling them.

If we are willing for a moment to acknowledge the degree to which we may have projected our problems onto "Science," and thereby become willing to re-examine our own position, where then are we at fault? Certainly we have tried hard and worked diligently, in the face of only minimal encouragement. Motivation has been matched by methodical skill. Empirical procedures, deductive procedures and imaginative hypothesis creation have all been tried exhaustively, and the resulting experiments have been well designed and conscientiously carried out. The numerous failures that have resulted in the past fifty years is somewhat unusual in a historical perspective, in that the common exponential curve of expanding discovery that usually emerges has not occurred for us.

Perhaps we have failed then at the initial step, so often overlooked in the initial burst of enthusiasm, energy, and urgency to get on with it. Perhaps we have been trapped by certain initial assumptions about the basic facts of parapsychology which may not turn out to be as intrinsic to the basic observation as we tend to think them to be. All we have ever observed is that certain defined events are correlated, between which there is no apparent physical connection. Certain notions, many of them extremely persuasive ones, have been adduced to this basic fact. An example is the idea that psi phenomena is a cognitive process. It has been a very popular one, and it has even crept into many "definitions" of psi. The experiments have become framed in terms that demand various cognitive responses from subject and agent.

Actually, there is very little evidence at the present time that perceptual or cognitive aspects of the ESP situation are

anything more than epiphenomena. True, it is the aspect that has most caught our attention. It does not follow, however, that this aspect of psi is in fact intrinsic to the process itself. Secondly, we have all, apparently, rather easily made the assumption that there is a basic communicative process involved. This would bear considerable inquiry. It may in fact be a communicative process. On the other hand, it may turn out to be that what appeared to be communicative characteristics are again epiphenomena of some other more basic process going on.

I only suggest these two areas as examples of questions which are not really framed as questions at the present time, but which perhaps should be. Once you improperly state a problem, then you are doomed to failure from that point on regardless of how clever you may be or how shrewdly you may design an experiment. Failure is guaranteed beforehand, since an assumption that is never questioned can never be invalidated if it indeed turns out to be a false one. Historically, most blind alleys in science turn out to have their sources in this kind of initial error. After carefully considering a great deal of experimental work, including my own, I find myself increasingly convinced that the task of highest priority must be a careful and diligent retracing of our thinking about psi. A return to the beginning is often the shortest route when the road that one travels to understanding appears to show little promise of finally adjoining the main thoroughfare of unified knowledge.