

# An Introduction to Parapsychology

SECOND EDITION

*H. J. Irwin*

McFarland

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*by*  
H. J. IRWIN



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June 1993

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## Introduction

*Parapsychology* is the scientific study of experiences which, if they are as they seem to be, are in principle outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists. Thus parapsychological phenomena ostensibly indicate the operation of factors unknown to or unrecognized by orthodox science, so-called *paranormal* factors. Familiar examples of such anomalous phenomena are experiences that seemingly involve extrasensory perception (ESP) and apparitions (e.g., ghosts). The objective of this book is to provide an introductory survey of parapsychologists' efforts to explore the authenticity and bases of these apparently paranormal phenomena.

As a general delineation of the scope of parapsychological research the above paragraph has several features warranting consideration. Most important is the point that in no way is there any presumption here of the existence of "the paranormal," contrary to the approach of many contemporary parapsychologists who actually regard parapsychology as the study of the paranormal. Certainly people report having experiences in which it seemed to them there was, for example, some information acquired without the involvement of the recognized human senses. But when such an "extrasensory" experience is termed *parapsychological* no conclusion has necessarily been reached that there exists a paranormal process by which information can be mediated outside the individual's sensory capacities.

As far as the definition of parapsychological experiences is concerned it is purely a matter of appearances, of how an experience *seems* to be. A

fundamental task of researchers then is to investigate the actual bases of these experiences, determining the extent to which the phenomena are explicable within the framework of accepted principles of mainstream science and if appropriate, defining the respects in which that framework should be extended in order to accommodate empirical findings on the phenomena.

Although parapsychological experiences appear to be paranormal they therefore are not defined to be so; rather, the question of their paranormality is a matter for investigation. It is important to appreciate the distinction between *parapsychological experiences* that do occur and underlying *paranormal processes* that are mere hypotheses for scientific investigation. All ESP experiences thus are parapsychological, but we require proof that any of them could be paranormal.

The foregoing representation of parapsychology also highlights the discipline's paradoxical relationship with science. Despite the fact that parapsychological phenomena ostensibly are contrary to conventional scientific wisdom it is through the methods of science that the phenomena are studied. Sociologically speaking, parapsychology is undertaken as a scientific endeavor regardless of its subject matter, flaws in any of its research procedures, and the skeptical rhetoric of its critics. More specifically, the perspective adopted in this book is that parapsychology is very much allied to psychology, the science of behavior. In other words, parapsychological research rightly is conducted predominantly within the broader context of the scientific investigation of behavior and its phenomena are best understood in the light of an appreciation of the principles of psychology. Thus a feature of modern parapsychology is that investigation of its phenomena is staged in the controlled environment of the psychological laboratory whenever possible. Scientific methodology is emphasized also in field studies of the sort that predominated in the days when such interests were known as *psychical research*, the study of phenomena apparently mediated directly by the mind or "soul."

In part the scientific orientation in parapsychology demands that the design and the conduct of an investigation be as impervious as possible to the beliefs of the research personnel (except of course where such beliefs are the focus of the study.) It is as well to note at the outset that a similar approach ideally should be adopted by you as a student of parapsychology. This is no simple achievement, in essence because the subject matter of parapsychology tends to evoke extreme reactions in people, either of uncritical, soft-minded gullibility in the paranormal or of unyielding, closed-minded skepticism. To get the most from your study of parapsychology it will be necessary to set aside such narrow preconceptions of the subject

and consciously to strive for a more objective, evenhanded style of weighing up arguments and data on both sides of an issue.

As it is depicted in this text parapsychology additionally is centered on experiences of *people*. This is not to claim that infrahuman animals are devoid of so-called psychic abilities. Indeed there has been some investigation, both in the laboratory and in the field, of parapsychological phenomena associated with animals. But like their counterparts in psychology these studies derive their pertinence largely from their role as simplified and highly controlled models of human behavior and from the comparative or evolutionary perspective they bring to the human context. The quantitative and qualitative data on people's parapsychological experiences also are manifoldly more extensive, detailed and diverse than that for animals; the human focus in parapsychology thereby is apt in relation to its empirical footing and its capacity for theoretical productivity. At the same time, when behavioral scientists seek to address the experiences of people rather than the behavior of animals they appreciate the difficulty of the task. Human cognitive, social, cultural, emotional, motivational, perceptual, neuropsychological, psychodynamic, and other psychological factors are so complex and variable that no individual experience can possibly be understood completely in terms of one basic dimension or process. Although parapsychology's emphasis upon people as the object of its study may make the discipline more personally meaningful you therefore should not have unduly high expectations of finding simple, comprehensive, scientifically sound answers to your queries about the nature of parapsychological experiences.

The scope of the field of parapsychology has drawn comment from both conceptual and pragmatic perspectives. In conceptual terms there has been some unease that parapsychology in essence is defined negatively, that is, a phenomenon is held to lie within the field's boundaries for no other reason than that it is defined not to lie outside them. This is a feature of the widely endorsed alternative notion of parapsychology as the study of the paranormal or of processes as yet undiscovered and unrecognized by science. That approach is founded upon a negative definition because parapsychologists are unable to specify what it is (as opposed to what it is not) that indicates an experience's involvement of the paranormal. It is thought insufficient to define extrasensory perception (ESP), for example, as direct apprehension of information by the mind, for the reason that "direct apprehension" is specifiable not in any affirmative way but only as something that is *not* via the usual sensory channels and is *not* derived inferentially from previous knowledge. Presumably what would be required here is a means of nominating what this paranormal transfer of information

actually is, enabling its discrimination from other, superficially similar experiences that are based on mere delusion and hallucination.

The common notion of parapsychology as the study of the paranormal is not embraced in this book. Rather, parapsychology here is defined as the study of experiences having the appearance of being in principle outside the realm of human capabilities as conceived by conventional scientists. Within the theoretical framework of modern behavioral science an extrasensory experience, for example, simply could not have occurred as it is reported to have done. But now the task of the parapsychologist is not the study of negatively defined underlying paranormal factors, but rather it is deemed to entail a systematic exploration of various possible bases and characteristics of experiential reports. Certainly this work will include investigation of the occurrence of extrasensory experience when sensory and inferential sources of information have procedurally been eliminated, but this is quite distinct from a pursuit of the paranormal. By defining parapsychology in terms of *appearances* the discontent over negative definition should lose some of its potency. It is unnecessary, for example, to define extrasensory experience in a way that will distinguish it from delusory or hallucinatory experience, because conceivably "ESP" might one day be shown to be just that. Admittedly, if paranormality is negatively defined then ultimately so too must the "appearance of being paranormal," but at least the latter is not predicated simply upon the exclusion of any list of scientifically accepted processes.

This raises the possibility that the terms of our adopted definition are temporally relative, that is, a given phenomenon might not be classified as parapsychological forever. Suppose that ESP were shown conclusively to be due to some presently recognized psychological processes and was relabeled with some name less provocative of the paranormal. In time people then might come to view such an experience no longer as incompatible with scientific principles nor as suggestive of a paranormal event, in which case the phenomenon rightly would shift from the parapsychological domain to some other area of psychology. But in that event the phenomenon should at least remain a legitimate issue for psychological research. If on the other hand extrasensory experience was defined explicitly as a *paranormal* phenomenon a demonstration that this was not so more likely would prompt psychologists to believe the phenomenon had been eliminated as a matter of research. Temporal relativity therefore does not loom as an unacceptable limitation of our definition of parapsychology.

Cultural relativity could be another type of conceptual limitation. Certainly if parapsychology is depicted as the study of the paranormal there is the problem that what people classify as paranormal will vary from one

culture to another. In some societies, for example, ESP is regarded as a human skill that falls entirely within the natural order, yet in our society it generally is thought of as paranormal. On the other hand by defining parapsychology in terms of its phenomena's apparent relation to conventional scientific principles, the issue of cultural relativity becomes somewhat less contentious because science is an international and comparatively cross-cultural activity. A phenomenon's status in the framework of conventional science therefore is accorded greater significance than its interpretation by members of individual societies. The definition of parapsychology may still be culturally bound to the extent of its scientific perspective, but in any event that is quite consistent with the view that parapsychology has a claim to being part of the world of science.

The demarcation of parapsychological phenomena in terms of appearances nevertheless encounters a few practical problems. One is that some instances of stage magic, especially mentalism, might be held to have the superficial form of the paranormal and hence have grounds for being classified as parapsychological. Although most researchers properly would reject this categorization it could have merit in some respects. A parapsychologist's knowledge of legerdemain certainly can be advantageous as a guard against fraudulent psychics (Hansen, 1985), and magical tricks can be used in a laboratory setting as a context for exploring the foundations of people's interpretation of events as paranormal (e.g., see Benassi, Singer & Reynolds, 1980). But while the superficial form of stage magic may be that of the paranormal these performances typically are not *perceived* by the audience as actually being paranormal.

By presenting himself or herself as a magician instead of as a medium or psychic the performer communicates the illusory character of the act and hence people do not see it as involving processes currently unrecognized by conventional science. For that reason a piece of stage magic generally would not be regarded as a parapsychological experience. If magicians do depict themselves as psychic, however, their performance may well be accepted by the audience as paranormal. In that case magic falls in much the same class as fraud. The stance taken here is that if the public is deceived into construing a phenomenon as paranormal then their experience should nonetheless be deemed parapsychological and be the subject of study by parapsychologists. The result of such research of course may be that people become aware of the deception, the phenomenon becomes decreasingly viewed as paranormal, and its study shifts from the predominantly parapsychological domain to that of social psychologists and sociologists.

Again, there may be other phenomena interpreted as paranormal by the general public and yet excluded from study by parapsychologists. The

considerable majority of scientific parapsychologists would not concede as legitimate issues in their field such things as witchcraft, popular astrology, fairies, the Bermuda Triangle, numerology, and Tarot readings, despite the common image of these matters as paranormal in the mind of the public and indeed for many skeptics (e.g., see Frazier, 1981). I suspect that parapsychologists' rejection of these topics springs in part from political motives; to give serious consideration to the above phenomena would severely prejudice parapsychology's already tenuous status as a science in the eyes of the rest of the scientific community. In any event, parapsychologists effectively have restricted the scope of their study to phenomena that are ostensibly paranormal in relatively specific respects. These respects may be depicted in the following terms. First, the focal phenomena may present as a paranormal form of communication; cases of apparent ESP are an instance of this type. Second, other phenomena accepted for investigation by parapsychologists seem to imply a metaphysical facet of human existence; for example, a reported sighting of a ghost might be taken as putatively paranormal under this perspective. Additionally, a phenomenon such as a spiritualist medium's apparent communication with the spirit of a deceased person may be of interest to parapsychologists on both of the above counts. Regardless of the rationale for such demarcation of parapsychological endeavor, the fact remains that the average citizen's notion of paranormal phenomena is evidently far broader than that of the academic parapsychologist.

Although the exclusion of some particular phenomena from the field may be disputatious there is broad consensus in the view that traditionally there have been three basic domains of parapsychological research, namely extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, and the survival hypothesis. The nature of each of these will be addressed in turn.

An *extrasensory experience* is one in which it appears that the experient's mind has acquired information directly, that is, seemingly without either the mediation of the recognized human senses or the processes of logical inference. By way of illustration, on a few occasions I have been thinking about some friend and have had my thoughts interrupted by a phone call from that very person. Now, with sufficient knowledge of the context of this type of occurrence it could be possible to explain, or explain away, the experience in "rational" terms that do not appeal to the existence of any paranormal process called ESP. To this extent it is presumptuous to label the experience "extrasensory." But as with other parapsychological phenomena, we are concerned just with appearances, and from that perspective the above example superficially suggests the operation of some paranormal link between my thoughts and those of my friend. The

example, no doubt a familiar encounter for many readers, represents a particular type of extrasensory experience that ostensibly entails direct mind-to-mind communication, so-called *telepathy*. In some instances the extrasensory experience relates to information not in another mind but in part of the objective environment. Thus a person's awareness of sensorially inaccessible visual events is termed *clairvoyance*, and ESP of auditory events, *clairaudience*; again, "clairvoyance" commonly is used in a generic fashion to designate extrasensory apprehension of any class of objective events. Sometimes too, ESP apparently is displaced in time. Extrasensory awareness of a future event is known as *precognition*, and that of a past event, *retrocognition*.

Often it can be difficult to determine how an actual extrasensory experience should best be classified. Consider an example. From time to time I find myself thinking I have not heard from one of my professional colleagues for a while, and later the same day I receive a letter from that person. Perhaps this may be deemed to entail ostensible extrasensory awareness of the letter itself, in which case my experience would be considered clairvoyant. Or the experience might be construed as apparent awareness of the perceptions of the mail sorter, that is, an instance of telepathic experience. Or again it could be represented as a precognitive experience of the subsequent mail delivery or of my opening the letter, or perhaps even a retrocognitive experience of my correspondent writing the letter some weeks earlier. In practice therefore, the utility of the proposed categories of ESP may be doubtful. Much the same could be said of their application to the description of laboratory data. Thus it was felt necessary to devise the expression *general extrasensory perception* (GESP) to refer to data that could have reflected unknown components of clairvoyance or telepathy or both (Rhine, 1948, p. 44). In the laboratory context the various terms nevertheless may usefully be employed in conveying the type of experimental procedure followed in an investigation.

In this book one convenient terminological convention is observed as far as possible. The terms extrasensory perception, telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and the like usually are intended to refer to a hypothetical paranormal process, one that conceivably could account for a given parapsychological phenomenon; of course, the process might or might not actually exist. On the other hand such expressions as extrasensory experience, telepathic experience, clairvoyant experience, and precognitive experience designate events that do occur, experiences that people do have and which on the surface suggest the operation of a paranormal process. It could be said, for example, that a parapsychologist investigates the nature of extrasensory experience and in the course of doing so, gathers



evidence on the existence or otherwise of extrasensory perception. The “extrasensory” in *extrasensory experience* therefore pertains to appearances and not necessarily to reality, whereas the “extrasensory” in *extrasensory perception* refers to the nature of a hypothesized paranormal reality. Occasionally this convention is overlooked, usually in order to avoid the tedium of frequent repetition of a given expression, but the sense should nonetheless be evident; for example, reference may be made to ESP when clearly we are speaking of extrasensory experience.

Extrasensory experience and ESP constitute one of the three basic domains of parapsychological research. A second domain is that of *psychokinesis* (PK), a word that translates literally as “movement by the mind.” A PK experience entails an apparent mind-over-matter effect, that is, a case where an individual’s thoughts or preferences appear to have had a direct influence upon the structure of the physical environment. The influence seemingly occurs without the mediation of recognized physical energies or mechanisms, particularly those comprising the human motor system. In the popular view PK probably would be most strongly exemplified by the spoon-bending performances of the Israeli psychic Uri Geller or by the apparently paranormal displacement of objects by the Russian psychic Nina Kulagina. Psychokinetic experiences, however, need not involve observable movement; the stopping of a clock at the time of a loved one’s death, for example, commonly is construed as an event of the mind-over-matter variety.

The labels *extrasensory perception* and *psychokinesis* were devised originally to convey the ostensible nature of the respective phenomena in a vividly descriptive fashion. Today, however, they are rather unsatisfactory as technical terms because they are so presumptive of the paranormal processes that hypothetically could underlie the experiences. Even if ESP exists it might well operate by way of some (as yet undiscovered) sort of sensory modality, a “sixth sense,” and hence not be “extrasensory.” Again, if ESP is truly extrasensory then it might be more akin to ideation than to “perception.” Similar objections can be leveled at the term psychokinesis.

Although it is convenient to have graphically descriptive nomenclature for a phenomenon it should also be atheoretical, and unfortunately neither of the two above terms meets this criterion. For that reason the British parapsychologist B. P. Wiesner introduced *psi phenomena* as a generic term encompassing both ESP and PK (Thouless, 1942; Thouless & Wiesner, 1948). The Greek letter *psi* here is used to denote the unknown paranormal element in these experiences in much the same way as the letter *x* represents the unknown in an algebraic equation until its identity is determined. In effect, however, *psi* constitutes more than a blanket term;