

# Approaching a Metamorphosis in Parapsychology



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For at least a century and a half psi phenomena have held a fascination for some scientists and have been anathema to others.

That their scientific study is gaining acceptance may be partly because improved experimentation procedures and new instrumentation have yielded better confirmed results. It is probably even more a consequence of cultural changes that allow these phenomena to “fit in” to a degree that would have been hard to foresee even twenty years ago.

Thus it will not do to examine the impact of psychic phenomena in isolation from the changing paradigm of scientific understanding and the cultural movements evident in recent years. I use the word *paradigm*, in the sense made popular by Thomas Kuhn, to refer to the basic pattern of perceiving, thinking, valuing, and acting associated with a particular vision of reality. The whole social organism moves together, and appears to be fast approaching a metamorphosis in

which the field of parapsychology is destined to play a significant role.

Parapsychology and the kindred consciousness studies are not just an emerging set of new findings and theories, about which we may conjecture as to social impacts. We have instead to ask, “What new pattern is this a part of?” Watt’s invention of the steam engine provides a parallel. The narrow query as to social impact of the steam engine might have led to the answer that it would make possible the pumping of water out of deep coal mines and hence would facilitate the shift from wood fuel to coal. But the question, “What new pattern?” yields the answer, the Industrial Revolution.

## The Discomforts of Scientists

We begin our search for clues as to the form of this new pattern by re-

calling a few events in the past century and a half of scientific history. All societies have their official or recognized truth-seeking and truth validating activities and institutions; in the Western world this has been science. Accordingly, what came to be accepted in the scientific community as truth has had important consequences for the basic beliefs of the culture. There are a number of instructive instances where scientists have stumbled for a while over some awkward data and then recovered from their temporary discomforts and incorporated the new with limited strain.

One of the oldest areas of psychological knowledge has to do with those strange phenomena grouped together under the term “hypnosis.” Hypnotism has been studied systematically for over a century and a half, although it has been admitted to scientific respectability only much more recently. Among the scientifically demonstrated aspects of hypnosis are that hypnotic suggestion can bring about anesthesia and analgesia, local or general; positive and negative hallucinations; regression to an earlier age; unusual muscular strength, rigidity, resistance to fatigue; and organic effects normally outside voluntary control. For example, a hypnotized subject may be induced to perceive an imaginary kitten placed in her lap. She experiences stroking the kitten and hearing it purr; the senses of sight, touch, and hearing seem to corroborate the hypnotist’s suggestion. Yet this is a “positive hallucination” there is no kitty there.

Other examples are familiar. A subject accepts the suggestion that a person sitting in a particular chair really is

not there; he perceives an empty chair. A hypnotized person is persuaded that a small wastebasket is fastened to the floor; struggling mightily, he is unable to lift it. A subject’s body is rendered rigid by appropriate suggestions; he is then used to bridge the space between two chairs, and one or more individuals mount and stand on top of his unsupported chest and abdomen. Blisters and burned spots can be produced by hypnotic suggestion; or a person may be rendered unsusceptible to heat that ordinarily would produce severe burns.

The analgesic and anesthetic potentialities of hypnosis were demonstrated a century ago in hundreds of apparently painless major operations, some witnessed by scores of physicians. Yet the possibility of the phenomenon’s existence was denied and medical journals refused to publish papers documenting the work. Patients were accused of deluding or colluding with their doctors in pretending to feel no pain while limbs were cut off or abdominal operations were performed.

Hypnosis clearly has a long history of irrational opposition. It is less clear just what was so discomforting about these phenomena. Perhaps it is that they so obviously raise doubts that we know what is real. But the important point in our context is that scientists once felt very uncomfortable with hypnosis and now feel quite comfortable – although they are really not much better off in terms of any sort of “mechanism” or “explanation.” The phenomena remain mysterious; however, it is now a comfortable mystery.

The concept of unconscious processes, too, became acceptable to scientists only recently. The initial

reaction to the hypotheses of Freud and other pioneers in this area was one of discomfort, rationalized in a number of ingenious ways. To be sure, these are strange ideas—that of mental processes over which I exert no control and of which I have only sporadic or inferred knowledge; the concept of myself repressing information, distorting it or hiding it from my conscious awareness, and lying to myself; the whole sense of one part of myself deceiving or sending cryptic messages to another part of myself. But the strange became familiar, the uncomfortable became comfortable, and unconscious processes became a useful and legitimated concept.

Similarly, the concepts of psychosomatic illness and accident proneness, the power of self-suggestion – the idea that mentally I cause my own headaches and stomach ulcers, or disturb my own kidney functioning, or unconsciously contrive my “accidentally” broken leg, or self-suggest my successes and my failures—were extremely discomforting. They became acceptable only after an initial rejection.

When F. W. H. Myers’s *Human Personality* was published in 1903, summarizing preliminary explorations of taboo areas of extraordinary psychic phenomena, included in this forbidden category were not only unconscious processes and hypnosis, but sleep and dreams, and creativity (“inspiration”). The universal testimony of highly creative persons has been that their created projects are the result of higher, unconscious processes over which they have only limited control.

Myers’s vanguard parapsychological treatise stresses the essential

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similarities between such psychic phenomena as telepathy and clairvoyance and the experiences of creative geniuses and of mathematical prodigies. Three quarters of a century ago creativity was part of the domain of “psychical research” – hardly scientifically respectable.

Biofeedback techniques and the related explorations of the past quarter century provided startling revelations. Subjective, inner states have physically measurable correlates – rapid eye movement, changes in skin resistance, muscle tensions, EEG (brain-wave) components, electric and magnetic fields around the body. Furthermore, when these indicators are picked up by sensors and returned to the body as input signals, all sorts of involuntary bodily processes and states can be brought under voluntary control. Here was a new basis for legitimation of studies of human’s inner world of experience (since at least some aspects of the phenomena are subject to physical measurement)

and also a whole new kit of tools. Again the implications are profound. Apparently I do know, in some sense, how I grow my hair and assimilate my food and construct a fetus – except that because of the absence of suitable feedback the processes go on totally outside my realm of ordinary consciousness. And the Indian yogis who claimed control over involuntary processes were onto something Western science has missed. Again, scientists experienced some discomfort over implications, in time becoming comfortable.

#### **The Domain of “Ordinary” Science and the “Private” World of Subjective Experience**

Now all that preliminary discussion was preparation for the point that there are presently two areas of research about which the majority of scientists still feel some discomfort – discomfort which we may assume will in time go away. One of these is the beginnings of a systematization of knowledge about different states of consciousness, including those inner experiences which have formed the bases for the world’s religions and out of which have come humanity’s deepest value commitments. The other is the important testing ground of parapsychology.

The latter is a crucial area precisely because it lies midway between and links the objective world of public observation, the domain of “ordinary” science, and the “private” world of subjective experience. The phenomena of psychic research are anomalous – their occurrence is widely attested to, yet they do not “fit in.” Still they speak clearly to the point that something is fundamentally in-

complete about a world view which cannot accommodate them. They also serve as a sort of reality test for the universe of inner experience. They are not wholly inner – they are characterized by something being publicly observable. Neither are they wholly outer, since some activity of the mind is clearly involved.

The following partial list will serve to delineate the territory under discussion: telepathy, the apparently extrasensory communication of one mind to another; clairvoyance, the apparently extrasensory perception of aspects of the physical world, as in “remote viewing” or “out of body” experience; clairvoyant diagnosis of illness; clairvoyant perception of information about a past owner or user of a physical object; rapid “faith” healing; retrocognition, the “remembering” of events that happened to some other person, or prior to the birth of the “rememberer”; precognition, the “remembering” of events some time in the future; psychokinesis, the apparent influencing of the physical world through mental processes other than by the usual psychomotor processes (e.g. levitation); unusual control of involuntary processes (e.g. stigmata, firewalking); thought photography, the apparent production of an image on a photographic film through mental processes alone; and unusual mental abilities (e.g. speaking in unknown tongues, the powers of mathematical prodigies).

Evidence mounts that these sorts of preternormal knowings and abilities are latent in all persons, but typically highly repressed. One sort of experiment that has been performed in various versions makes

use of a stimulus that produces a subliminal effect (e.g., a flashing stroboscopic light which, when the flashing frequency is near the alpha frequency, around 10 cycles per second, induces a distinctive component in the EEG wave). The stimulus is applied to one person and the response is picked up from a second person, remote and isolated from the first. The second person is typically unable to guess at better than a chance basis whether or not the stimulus is applied to the other person during a given time interval – but his subliminal response indicates that unconsciously s/he knows. (A necessary condition seems to be that the two persons are in some rapport, that one is paying attention to the other – but then we have no adequate explanation for what it means to “pay attention.”) The implication, if we extrapolate beyond this particular situation, is that probably we will eventually discover that all persons have the full range of psychic phenomena as potentialities, all unconsciously understood and all thoroughly repressed.

### The Extent of the Challenge

It is important to understand both why these two research areas of consciousness exploration and psi have caused scientists such acute discomfort and also why the reconciliation seems now close at hand. The extent of the potential impact of these areas on the scientific world view is suggested by the following list of premises which the scientific paradigm, until recently, has tended to imply:

(1) The only conceivable ways in which humans come to acquire knowledge are through the physical senses and perhaps through some sort of memory storage in the genes.

(2) All qualitative properties are ultimately reducible to quantitative ones; that is, color is reduced to wavelength, hate and love to the chemical composition of glandular secretions, etc.

(3) There is a clear distinction between the objective world, which is perceivable by anyone, and subjective experience, which is perceived by the individual alone, in the privacy of the mind.

(4) The concept of the free inner person is a prescientific explanation for behavior caused by forces impinging upon the individual from the environment, interacting with internal tensions and pressures characteristic of the organism. “Freedom” is behavior for which scientists have not yet found the cause.

(5) What we know as consciousness or awareness of our thoughts and feelings is really only a side effect of physical and biochemical processes going on in the brain.

(6) What we know as memory is simply a matter of stored data in the physical organism, strictly comparable with the storage of information in a digital computer. (Thus it is impossible for a person to “remember” an event that happened to someone else, in a different lifetime).

(7) The nature of time being what it is, there is obviously no way in which we can obtain knowledge of the future other than by rational prediction from known causes. (Thus it is impossible for anyone to “remember” an event happening three weeks hence. )

(8) Since mental activity is simply a matter of fluctuating states in the physical organism, it is completely impossible for this mental activity to exert any effect directly on the physical world outside the organism.

(9) The evolution of the universe and of humans has come about through purely physical causes, through random mutations and natural selection. There is no justification for any concept of universal purpose or teleological urge, either in the evolution of consciousness or in the strivings of the individual.

(10) The individual does not survive the death of the organism, or if there is any sense in which the individual exists after the death of the physical body we can neither comprehend it in this life nor in any way obtain knowledge regarding it.

The reason consciousness research is such a bitterly contested battleground is that the data in these areas challenge all of the above premises. Yet it was on the basis of these positivistic premises that the increasingly prestigious scientific worldview was able, in the past, to dismiss as of secondary consequence the religious, aesthetic, and intuitive experiences



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of humanity, and hence to erode the value postulates based in those subjective experiences.

The reason that all these inter-related research areas – altered states of consciousness, hypnosis, psychosomatic illness, unconscious processes, psi – have tended to be discomforting is that they so evidently implicate the ultimate question: “How do I know what I know, and how do I know it is *true*. Saint-Exupéry laid down (in his book *Wind, Sand, and Stars*) the fundamental definition of truth: “Truth is not that which is demonstrable. Truth is that which is ineluctable” that which cannot be escaped.

How do I know what is ineluctable? This question is the heart of the discipline of epistemology and to one with the stamina to pursue it there, much examination of the subject can be found. Essentially there are two quite

different forms of knowing (modern writers are fond of associating these with the left and right sides of the brain), and we all use both daily. One is “knowing about” things in the manner of scientific “facts”; the other is knowing by intuitive identification with, as in knowing another person.

This second kind of knowing is what the poet Archibald MacLeish referred to when he wrote: “We really know a thing only when we are filled with a wonderfully full, new and intimate sense of it and, above all, of our relation with it. This sense – this knowledge – art can give but abstraction (science) cannot. “The Indian scholar Radhakrishnan described perception in the higher stages of consciousness thus: “The conscious division and separation of [...] the object from the subject, which is the normal condition, is broken down. The individual surrenders to the object and is absorbed by it. He becomes what he beholds.”

Both kinds of knowing are subject to the possibility of error. The scientific way of “knowing about” involves meticulous testing to ensure that what is claimed as fact can be validated by other scientists making similar experiments or explorations. Intuitive knowing also demands the most careful checking against self-deception. The astonishing extent to which my mental processes are discovered to be outside of consciousness sheds doubt on how well I know even that most intimate being, myself. At best I seem to reveal to my conscious self only a small and badly distorted fragment of the wholeness that is “me”. Nevertheless, the task of self-knowledge is not futile; from each new vantage

point I seem to be able to look back and observe how I have fooled myself in a previous and lesser state of awareness.

Thus in opening up the exploration of consciousness, scientists are forced to confront questions that they have, throughout most of the history of scientific activity, managed to put aside for the philosophers to puzzle over. What are the essential limitations of “knowledge about”? What are the ultimate capabilities of the mind as observing instrument, discerning intuitive knowledge of the universe, and of mind itself? What are the ways in which the latter knowledge is best shared and consensually validated? In some sense all knowledge is ultimately subjective, since the root of all experience is consciousness; consequently, these new explorations that probe the problem of consciousness are fundamental indeed. This is where science, religion and philosophy meet. We can hardly blame the scientists if at this point their resolution quavers and their anxieties become more evident than usual.

In papers currently presented at scientific meetings and in articles published in the most prestigious scientific journals are indications that, with regard to both consciousness research and parapsychology, the transition from discomfort to comfort may be at hand. This is only partly because of the psychological effect, noted earlier, of having some physical and physiological correlates to inner experience, serving to legitimate the inquiry into consciousness. More importantly, it has to do with the growing realization within science

that it deals not with reality in some ultimate sense, but with models and metaphors. This has brought a change in attitude and a more promising climate for exploration of inner experience than heretofore.

The precursor to that realization came with the resolution of the battle in physics over the wave or particle nature of light. This was essentially resolved through recognition that both are only metaphors (as is the mathematical equation that incorporates elements of both) each being useful for expressing certain aspects of the transcendental nature of light. Certain photoelectric effects have no “explanation” in terms of the wave image of light. On the other hand, the electron microscope is “unexplainable” through a particle model of electrons and is understood through a wave image. The resolution of this issue set a pattern for others. Other facets, especially of deeper inner experience, demand other kinds of metaphors. We have yet to discover what particular metaphors will be most useful for our time; many of those that had the power to move people’s hearts in the past seem less useful now.

Even though these frontier scientific developments have not progressed very far, it is possible to infer in which direction they will push the image of human-in-the-universe. Wherever the nature of human has been probed deeply, in Eastern or Western traditions, the paramount fact that has emerged is the duality of experience. Humans are found to be both physical and spiritual, both aspects being “real” and neither fully describable in terms of the other. “Scientific” and

“religious” metaphors are complementary; neither contradicts the other.

Aldous Huxley found at the inner core of all the world’s religions, East and West, ancient and modern: “[It] recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; ... finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; ... places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.”

The basic experimental proposition is that humans can under certain conditions attain a higher awareness, a “cosmic consciousness,” in which state they have immediate knowledge of a reality underlying the phenomenal world, in speaking of which it seems appropriate to use such words as infinite and eternal (Divine Ground

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of Being, Brahman, Godhead). From this vantage point one’s own growth and creativity, and one’s participation in the evolutionary process, are seen to be under the ultimate direction of a higher center (Atman, the Oversoul, the “true Self”). In the Upanishads it is put, “An invisible and subtle essence is the spirit of the whole universe. That is reality. That is truth. Thou art that.”

The power of suggestion is such that people are literally and inescapably hypnotized by the suggestions they have absorbed from their culture since infancy. Thus humans go through life in a sort of hypnotic sleep, feeling that they are making decisions, having accidents happen to them, meeting chance acquaintances, etc. With more awareness the direction of the higher Self, “supraconscious choosing,” becomes apparent. People find that decisions they felt they had come to logically or through intuition were really reflections of choices made on the higher level of the Self; that their “inspirations” or “creativity” is essentially a breaking through of these higher processes; that experiences and relationships needed for growth were attracted to them by the Self and were by no means so accidental as they had assumed.

With increasing awareness the pull of material and ego needs is greatly lessened and people find that their deepest motivation is to participate fully in the evolutionary process, achieving wholeness (holleness, health) through alignment of supraconscious, conscious, and subconscious choices. Evolution is

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seen to be not a random matter, but directed by a higher consciousness and characterized by purpose – this purpose including development of individual centers of consciousness with freedom of choice, gradually moving toward ever – increasing knowledge of themselves, of Self, and of the Whole.

It follows from the foregoing that human potentiality is limitless; that all knowledge and power would be a function of every institution in society. Rather than being a segregated activity carried out at a certain place at a certain time period, learning toward human fulfillment would be a recognized aim of all of the various institutionalized activities in which the individual spends time. Society might be termed a

“learning – and – planning society”, since learning and planning are the two main kinds of activities (beyond those actually required for the functioning of the society) that are meaningful, nonstultifying, and non-polluting.

Under the new transcendentalism, science would be clearly understood to be a moral inquiry. Having a balanced effort of systematic exploration of both the objective and subjective realms of human experience, it could not be, as past science has tended to be, value-empty. It would resemble the humanities and religion, and the boundaries between these three disciplines would become less sharp – as is already presaged in the recent writings of some psychotherapists. The models and metaphors used will be multi-leveled, corresponding to different levels or realms of experience, and no conflict will be perceived if, for example, mystical experiences are congenial to one of these metaphorical frameworks and operant conditioning to another.

New impetus will be given to biological sciences (with a whole – systems emphasis) and consciousness studies. The latter will look strongly in the direction of new potentialities suggested by the newly appreciated powers of belief, imagination, and suggestion. Social science will be participative, in marked contrast to the “objective” observations of past social scientists. Experimenter and subject explore together, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and with equal status. (The resulting science would be significantly different from the industrial-age social science,

since the implicit goals are so different, prediction and control being replaced by the aim of guidance in individual and social development).

### Conclusion

As with education, many institutions would share responsibility, medicine, psychotherapy, education, religion, welfare, environmental health. There would be a recognition that the whole society is the environment that affects health. Thus, for example, equity in access to economic resources is an aspect of environmental health.

Finally, there is nothing in history to suggest that a social transformation of the magnitude suggested could occur without the most severe economic and social disruptions and system breakdowns. Only widespread understanding of why the transformation is taking place and of the kind of society that might emerge following our time of trouble can keep anxiety levels down and transition pains from becoming intolerable.

Developments in parapsychology and consciousness studies are part of this larger pattern. The next twenty years will show whether these forces are strong enough to bring about a major societal wrenching, whether they will somehow quiet down and die away, or whether the confrontation between the new demands and the old rigidities is so violent that the result is destruction without a promising rebuilding. This will not be one of the comfortable periods of history.

It will no doubt be an exciting one.