

Koestler's Legacy

Robert L Morris

Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh

Introduction

The noted writer and critic Arthur Koestler and his wife Cynthia provided in their wills for the establishment of an endowed Chair of Parapsychology at a British university. The declared intention was to further objective scientific research into "the capacity attributed to some individuals to interact with their environment by means other than the recognised sensory and motor channels". Following the Koestlers' deaths in 1982, their trustees advertised the post and in 1984 awarded the Chair to the University of Edinburgh. In 1985 I was fortunate enough to be invited to serve as the first occupant of the Chair, taking up the post in December of the same year. My remit was to develop a systematic and responsible research programme that would integrate this controversial area into the ongoing research and teaching activities of the university community. The editors of *The Skeptic* have invited me to describe how we have gone about our task over the last eleven years.

We have fairly limited resources. Our basic funding, from the Koestler Endowment earnings and from the Literary Estate, provides for a full-time secretary (Mrs Helen Sims) and two postdoctoral fellows, one fulltime (Dr. Deborah Delaney) and one part-time (Dr. Caroline Watt). We are located within the Department of Psychology, where I do some teaching and supervise research students at both Honours and postgraduate levels. Eight students have now completed Ph.D's under my supervision (a ninth has recently submitted his thesis), on theses related to parapsychology. We receive some additional research funding from outside institutions, for student support and for necessary equipment.

Integrative Parapsychology

In setting up a research plan, one of our main problems was to clarify just what serious parapsychology involves. Anyone can call themselves a parapsychologist, and media representations tend to put entertainment first with accuracy at best an afterthought. Thus we have developed what we call an Integrative Parapsychology, with six features:

We regard parapsychology as the study of apparent new means of communication, or interaction, between organisms and their environment (commonly referred to

as psi, or psychic ability), beyond those presently understood by the scientific community.

2. Parapsychology is an interdisciplinary problem area, not a separate discipline and not just a subset of psychology.

3. Parapsychology questions rather than presumes; our remit is to investigate a capacity attributed to some individuals and we are under no obligation to presume that capacity's existence.

4. Parapsychology incorporates the investigation of two sets of working hypotheses: the 'pseudopsi hypothesis', which states that most if not all of the evidence for psi is spurious, the result of our being misled or misinterpreting observations; and the 'psi hypothesis', which states that we do appear under certain conditions to have access to some genuinely new means of communication.

5. Parapsychology involves the study of observers drawing inferences, and can profit from the use of models of how we make observations about ostensibly psychic events, including how we can be misled by ourselves and others.

6. Parapsychology uses the tools of science, including detailed descriptions of natural occurrences, surveys, hypothesis formulation and testing, correlational studies, controlled experimental studies with systematic variation of condition, and construction of theoretical models.

What's not psychic but looks like it...

Our research has largely proceeded along two main lines. One involves the study of "what's not psychic but looks like it". Psychology has long been involved in the study of self-deception and error in human perception, memory, thinking and decision making. Within our group, Carl Williams is looking at some of the factors that lead us to attribute meaning to ambiguous information, with an eye toward eventual clinical application. Tony Lawrence is developing and testing a model of the factors involved in the formation of beliefs about psychic phenomena, as we are growing up and as adults as well. Both now have full time lectureships, at Liverpool Hope University College and Coventry University, respectively. Simon Sherwood is studying the effects of anomalous sleep experiences upon the formation and maintenance of belief





Professor Robert Morris

systems, extending Lawrence's work.' Additionally we have become quite involved in the psychology of conjuring and deliberate deception, drawing both on an integration of the relatively obscure writings of professional magicians and fraudsters and on experimental studies. This research involves surveys of the techniques for both physical and mental effects, as well

as strategies for presenting information to observers. Richard Wiseman (currently at the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield Campus) has studied the effects of observers' attitudes toward psi upon their ability to reconstruct the details of fraudulent psychic demonstrations shown to them on videotape, finding that those with positive attitudes were less likely to notice details related to how the trick was done. It's important as well to understand the psychological strategies of the confidence artist and the techniques by which psychic claimants attempt to negotiate the rules by which their claims will be accepted or rejected. Our work in these areas is currently best represented in a little book recently co-authored by Dr Wiseman and myself, *Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants*. It includes a description of the strategies pseudopsychics can use to produce even complex patterns of results in their data fraudulently. Of additional interest are the strategies by which fake psychic researchers persuade clients that they know all about the clients through psychic means. Chris Roe has specialised in this area, particularly in the verbal strategies often used. Together we are gradually working toward the development of a general model of deception, including the social context of such deceptive acts. We hope this line of research will be beneficial directly to parapsychological research as well as cognitive and clinical psychology and other disciplines where deception may be involved.

Assessing new means of communication

Our second main line of research involves assessment of the evidence for genuine new means of communication, including the development of better descriptive tools for exploring daily life experiences as well as experimental tools for producing psychic effects with sufficient strength and consistency that they can contribute to systematic research programmes to develop and test models of how psychic functioning, if it exists, actually works.

Some of this work involves a mix of questionnaire and interviews. Shari Cohn has used both to explore 'second sight' experiences within family units, analysing the material both quantitatively and qualitatively to look for patterns in the nature of the experiences themselves, family relationships and other salient factors. Carlos Alvarado is also using both techniques to look for pat-

terns in a specific kind of transpersonal experience known as an out-of-body experience, closely related to near-death experiences. Such research has been an under-represented component of formal parapsychology and can contribute a great deal to understanding the richness of the experiences involved, as well as in the development and testing of models about their nature. Frans Snel is studying the interactions among alternative health practitioners and their clients. Miriam Moss is studying the styles people use in describing the experiences that have happened to them.'

Naturalistic settings

Other research may involve bringing systematic investigation tools into naturalistic settings, to overcome the problems of ecological validity frequently associated with controlled, laboratory-based research with living organisms. We have done very little in this area, other than to explore ways of sealing off target materials that can then be turned over to individuals for exploratory work in non-laboratory settings. One study by Dr. Wiseman and Dr. John Beloff with an individual claimant produced chance results; another by Drs. Delanoy, Watt, Wiseman and myself with several individuals previously successful in the lab produced positive results. We will be pursuing this area, always in consultation with magicians, as part of our effort to conduct at least some of our research in more natural settings.

Laboratory studies – extrasensory perception

Most of our effort in this area has gone towards experimental studies of deliberate attempts to produce psychic effects in our own research facilities within the Psychology Department, emphasising procedures that have had a good track record with several other researchers. One line of research follows a noise reduction model for ESP studies and uses a mild sensory reduction technique known as the ganzfeld procedure, plus progressive relaxation, asking relaxed participants in a shielded room to produce mental impressions about the content of short film clips being displayed several rooms away. The procedure is automated and includes security features to guard against fraud by researchers as well as participants. Our results with this procedure are very encouraging, with effect sizes similar to those obtained elsewhere by researchers with less well safeguarded facilities, and our research with this technique continues. Several researchers have been involved with this work, including Kathy Dalton, Deborah Delanoy, Caroline Watt and final year undergraduate students in addition to myself.

Another line of research by Caroline Watt involves looking at individual differences in perceptual defensiveness and vigilance, following up on research done in several other countries indicating that people who score as defensive on a defense mechanism test do more poorly on controlled ESP tests. She has found similar results using a more objective procedure to assess perceptual defensiveness and vigilance, with vigilant people scoring better. This is consistent with the notion that for some people the information may be more distorted in the course of processing, although the finding may have other interpretations as well.

A third line of research has explored techniques purported to train or enhance psychic ability. This line of

research, largely conducted by Dr. Delanoy, Dr. Watt, Dr. Loftur Gissurarson and myself has presently produced only mixed results at best, and has in part contributed to the falsification of certain claims for psychic development techniques.

Psychokinesis

A fourth line of research involves attempts to influence through mental activity, e.g. intentions, the behaviour of electronic equipment such as random number generators based on a source of noise. Such research may seem inherently extremely implausible, as surely we would know it by now if we had any such ability. Nevertheless, low level but consistent effects have been produced in a variety of other laboratories. Our own results have produced at best extremely weak results, although there has been a tendency for the results to be stronger with those having more positive attitudes toward the possibility and those who feel they have had spontaneous experiences suggesting such effects. This research has been conducted largely by Dr Konrad Morgan, Dr Gissurarson and Paul Stevens, in addition to final year undergraduate students. We regard the work as contributing to the falsification of some hypotheses regarding the linkage between operator attitude and equipment failure. This work is being conducted in part as a joint project with researchers at the Institut für Grenzgebiet der Psychologie und Psychohygiene, exploring models of volitional strategies and their application to parapsychological research.

Interaction with living systems

A fifth line of research involves attempts by an active agent to influence the body physiology of a receiver several rooms away. One version of this involves exploring the idea of remote staring effects, through the use of closed circuit video. Although we are encouraged by some exploratory studies, this line of research is still in its preliminary stages. It is being conducted largely by Dr. Delanoy and Zachary McDermott.

History of parapsychology

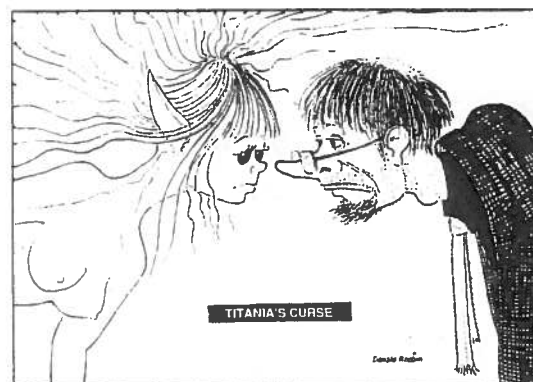
A final area of research involves the history and social context of criticism in parapsychology, conducted by Nancy Zingrone, and a set of surveys of methodological problems and issues by Dr. Julie Milton.

Concluding remarks

In short, our research programme is still in early stages, with more progress in some areas than others. We are clearly contributing to a better understanding of how we can be misled, both by ourselves and others, and we appear as well to be identifying certain areas where genuine psychic effects may be more readily manifest under conditions that will allow us to explore them more systematically. We are attempting to apply the tools of science to an extremely complex set of human experiences and their interpretation and we are acutely aware that we must avoid both the false positive error of claiming something is there when in fact it is not, as well as the false negative error of declaring something is not there when in fact it is. Both errors are bad science.

Professor Robert L Morris occupies the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at Edinburgh University.

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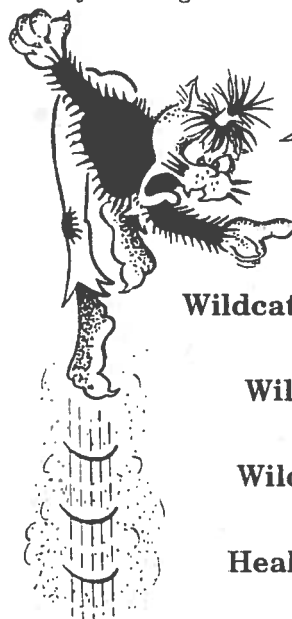
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