

ESP—SCIENCE OR PSEUDOSCIENCE?

"It's not faith that makes good science, it's curiosity."—Professor Barnhardt in *The Day The Earth Stood Still*.

In STARLOG number 12, not wishing to delve into material that would have been beside the point, I made the following succinct statement:

"... although ESP is a mainstay of science fiction, it has utterly no basis in science—only in wishful thinking."

I compounded the indiscretion in a footnote:

"... if you challenge this blunt assertion, review the laws of logic as they apply to establishing cause-and-effect relationships, and consider the insanity of such 'proofs' as 'I woke up the exact instant my dog died; so prove to me that that's *not* ESP!'"

STARLOG editors expected a number of letters of protest. We got them.

"Your West Coast Editor," writes Hal Crawford, Dallas, Texas, "is obviously unfamiliar with the data on *psi* phenomena. One experiment giving unusual results is a fluke; two are a coincidence; three or more are a *pattern*. To blame this body of data on wishful thinking and hoaxes is to slander the sanity and integrity of literally thousands of scientists and investigators on every major continent for nearly a century..."

R.S. McEnroe, Rockville Center, New York, writes:

"I am *extremely* upset with David Houston's offhanded dismissal of 'ESP's' (parapsychological phenomena, *please*) scientific basis (particularly on the specious for-instance given in his footnote). Does Houston know that because mice were frequently found around decaying matter, 'science' once assumed that mice were bred from rotting cloth and food? In the course of researching a paper for a psych course some years ago, I ran a classic Rhine ESP test with a score of volunteers and a long series of runs to minimize statistical vagueness, and was able to duplicate the results obtained in tests at Duke and the Rhine Institute. I.e., many subjects were able to discern by undetermined means the information on a series of concealed cards with an accuracy well beyond that indicated by random choice. This duplication of results is a classic definition of scientific verity—another researcher should be able to follow your methods and obtain the same results..."

Mark S. Erickson, Mishawaka, Indiana, reasons:

"... not only is that assertion suprisingly blunt (as Houston himself partly admitted), but it is just plain stupid! The Russians have already established that, at least in theory, telepathy is a viable means of communication. They have also done tentative experimentation with it in practice, and unless Americans start doing the same very soon, they (the Russians) might have all our defense secrets in fifty years or less." Erickson ties in a comment on "warp drive" with "ESP" (I agree that they belong in the same epistemological category) and about both phenomena, he says: "... the word *fantasy* should not have been used, because that word implies that it can never be done, no matter how technology may advance. How can we possibly know that? Scientists were once certain that man could never fly... and look what has happened today! Why does nobody accept the possibility of anything that cannot be taken apart, analyzed, and studied piece by piece...?"

"Is Mr. Houston aware," asks Terence A. FitzSimons, Laguna Beach, California, "of experiments in this field



Photo: © 20th Century-Fox
The Day The Earth Stood Still.

being conducted at UCLA's Stanford Research Facility? More specifically, what of a series of experiments conducted by two physicists at Stanford, Drs. Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, wherein they have demonstrated physiologically that messages can pass from mind to mind, even though the subjects are separated in electrically shielded rooms?"

Reverend Joseph C. Corsbie, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, states:

"When I saw this statement in STARLOG, I was stunned. I saw my world and everything I believe in crumble to dust; for if this is true, then Joseph's interpreting of Pharoah's dreams is just an old wives' tale—because interpreting dreams takes some ESP on Joseph's part." Corsbie goes on to claim (correctly, in my opinion) that the entire mystical interpretation of Christianity depends upon applications of *psi* phenomena, that without ESP, psychokinesis, precognition, and the like, miracles could not have occurred. He continues: "From my own experience with psychic phenomena—from thought forms through ESP, even to astral traveling—I know these things to be true. In *Star Wars*, Obi Wan Kenobi talked of a force that surrounds and envelops us, binds the universe together. These few words hold a seed of truth that is greater than science—but here we go back to *faith: the key to new worlds*. And if you go [strictly] by science (a bumble bee cannot fly, according to the science of aerodynamics), so much for that..."

My personal favorite among the letters of protest is one from Carolyn R. Meredith, Olean, New York. It is long, clear, challenging, and friendly. She says, among other things:

"The question should be whether or not the faculties traditionally lumped together as ESP exist in the real universe. Science is only a formalized set of rules by which the information about that universe can be gathered and

reliably correlated.

"I have [an] objection to your invoking the laws of logic. With the proper data, you can prove irrefutably that sailing west across the Atlantic is going to dump Cristoforo Columbo off the edge of the world. For a more contemporary example, anybody who has ever worked or played with a computer can tell you about $GI = GO$. If you put garbage in, you're going to get garbage out, be the logic ever so perfect.

"When you have observed certain results in reality, postulated theoretical reasons for them, and verified the proposed relationships back in the real world, *then* you can talk about cause and effect. Not before.

"Do I sound paranoid? I have a right to, I think. You've said essentially that here is a subject, ESP, that is not to be looked into, and there's *nothing* that'll get a scientist's natural share of irrational impulses alerted so fast as that line of talk. You may take it on faith (as an untested assumption) that these phenomena do not occur. I prefer not to. As someone once said, 'It isn't faith that makes good scientists . . . it's curiosity.' . . ."

She adds a P.S.:

"If you're the type who's impressed by titles, you can amend whatever version of 'This woman doesn't know what she's talking about' you're employing to 'This Doctor of Philosophy doesn't know what she's talking about.'"

I agree with many of Dr. Meredith's remarks (even some I did not include here). Yet I remain firm in my position that ESP (or any so-called *psi* phenomena) has not been proved even to exist; and further that there is precious little reason to look into the matter.

We are dealing, of course, with *my* opinion. That the Sun is hot is also just my opinion—unless you have made observations similar to mine and happen to concur. My position is a negative one, and *it is impossible to prove a*



Photo. © M.G.M.

Telekinetic tots topple a town in *Village Of The Damned*, 1960 ESP-thriller.

negative proposition. (Try proving that Santa does *not* live at the North Pole. It can't be done except by surveying every inch of the Pole, over and under the ice, and then discrediting the *positive* assertion that he *does* live there. All I really need to do is state that none of the writers' arguments convinces me I might be wrong, since the burden of proof rests with those claiming that ESP *does* exist. But I'll do more than that.

Faith (as both Rev. Corsbie and Dr. Meredith are aware) is *not* a scientific method. Literally, when one takes something on faith, he does so *knowingly* in the absence of evidence. (I'm not talking about taking calculated risks on the basis of skimpy evidence, or the kind of trust you place in your family doctor; I mean *faith*—a nonrational claim to knowledge.) I personally have never had a "*psi* experience" I could not explain in a *much* simpler manner (using Occam's Razor*). I have never read convincing evidence for it (including some of the examples letter-writers mentioned) in scientific journals. The only way I could entertain a belief in ESP is through faith: faith that so many other people's belief must make it true. I'd like to think that I would have been among the few, in the Middle Ages, who did not believe that the world was flat.

Dr. Meredith challenges my invocation of the laws of logic and then herself dares me to break one of them. Her P.S. suggests I might succumb to the "argument of authority" fallacy by considering her more convincing due to her credentials. Others of the letter-writers have, I believe, committed just this fallacy—when they offer as proof the fact that various "authoritative" schools are studying parapsychology. That Stanford, Rhine, and others are studying the subject means nothing to me. A good many colleges have offered courses in astrology, too.

Some philosophers and scientists today will go so far as to claim that certainty cannot be attained—even through the use of scientific method. In so saying, they elevate faith to a position equivalent to that of science, as a means of acquiring knowledge. I discount such negativists out of hand, because they *begin* with a logical fallacy: that of "self-exclusion." If no knowledge is possible, then how can *they* know their position to be valid. Many who state this "knowledge and certainty are impossible" premise neglect to place what knowledge they do possess into its proper context, or neglect to phrase their findings precisely.

I suspect that a declining regard for certainty, precision, and logic accounts for the fact that researchers in para-psychology seem so willing to settle for "statistical proofs."



Photo. © United Artists

Carrie (Sissy Spacek) bears the marks of telekinetic power. A seemingly 'normal' lass, her powers run amok.



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VISIONS

(Continued)

The only statistic integral to a scientific proof is 100 per cent. Statisticians deduce that the chances are greater than two octillion to one that a man could take a deck of cards, shuffle them, and deal four perfect bridge hands (four hands, all of the same suit). And yet among professional cardsharps this happens fairly frequently because their shuffle is so precise that one card falls at a time thus maintaining a cycle in the new deck which came stacked in order to begin with. When researchers start with a statistical probability, and then find subjects who average better than that—this is no more a proof for ESP than it is a proof that the original statistic failed to include some variable(s). Statistics can be useful, however, in the formulation of theories; and (as Meredith says) theory precedes establishment of cause-and-effect relationships.

For those who were *extremely* upset by the assertion that ESP is a product of wishful thinking, allow me to suggest an experiment:

Begin with the logical assumption that ESP does not exist, that there *has* to be some other explanation for anything that looks like a *psi* phenomenon. Now take all those zillions of reports and books on ESP that you'll find in the occult section at bookstores (which is where I think they belong) and work *hard* to come up with alternative explanations that might possibly account for the events in question. You will immediately discover, among other things, how much additional information you would need to decide *anything* about them. If that doesn't make a non-believer out of you, nothing will.

Meredith is quite right when she states that GI=GO. Through the flawless use of logic, you can "prove" that Mickey Mouse was the 12th President of the United States—if you begin with the appropriate irrational premises. I disagree with Dr. Meredith, though, in her implication that logic is superfluous in the quest for truth. Only a chain of logic can tell you that your *premise* is false, that the Presidency is not accessible to mice (as a rule).

In a proper scientific proof, the premises must be reduced, through a logical chain, down to facts which are empirically observable in reality. (This is also the way one gains confidence in the instruments—electron microscopes, etc.—that provide data not *directly* observable.)

Most of the letter-writers contend that my position of non-belief is tantamount to a mental block, that if the scientists were to share my position, progress would be stopped dead in its tracks. Look at it from my point of

view. If there were a great popular trend toward belief in the Easter Bunny, and a good many reputable investigators who might be otherwise employed were spending many hours in a systematic quest for evidence . . . that would be more likely to stop progress.

The quest for ESP evidence strikes me rather like the alchemists' desire to turn lead into gold. Sure, some good came out of that, eventually—the science of chemistry. But if the first few who tried it had suspected that the gold trick simply was not going to work, they might have turned to alloys, metal oxides, chemical compounds and the isolation of natural elements much sooner.

One last thought:

The human brain is so complex that there is still conflict among biophysicists over the roles played by electricity and chemistry within its cells. The human *mind* is even more complex. *Psychology* is not even an exact science yet. To my way of thinking, until psychology can explain ordinary verbal communication and the complexities of the subconscious mind (how do we know things we don't remember learning?), there seems to be no point in introducing *Parapsychology*. Rather, I'd like to see those puzzling phenomena concerning the mind end up in a data bank of the unexplained. Like UFO's. If you "explain" a puzzle by miscategorizing it, the data is most often lost. If you "explain" a puzzle by placing it on some unknowable astrophane, the data has been sabotaged.

So, although I loved *Star Wars* and responded profoundly to the strength and stature of Ben Kenobi, and *The Martian Chronicles* is a wonderful book, I don't believe in ESP. Neither, I've been led to believe, does the vast majority in the scientific community. But who knows, maybe someday we'll encounter an alien race within whose nervous system there exists organic fluidic circuits capable of producing rudimentary radio-spectrum waves that are somewhat amplified by an unusually high level of body electricity, somehow; and perhaps these creatures will communicate through broadcast code pulses. To them, though, this will be everyday stuff—not *extra-sensory*; and to us, it will be something to be detected and decoded through instrumentation. How do I know *humans* have no such fluidic circuits? Naturally I have no "proof" for the negative proposition; but I never found any reason to entertain the remotest notion that there might be any possibility of it. ★

*William of Occam formulated his "law of parsimony" in the 14th Century. Literally it states that "entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity": in practice it admonishes that one present scientific principles in their simplest and most economical formulation. Psychologist Lloyd Morgan interpreted it to state that "no action should be interpreted in terms of a higher psychological faculty when a lower faculty suffices."