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"RESEARCH PROJECT"26. A Fresh Look at Extrasensory Perception

by

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OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT:

This is the General Overseas Service of the BBC. The last talk in the series "RESEARCH PROJECT" is by Stephen Abrams, Director of the new Oxford Parapsychological Laboratory. He calls his talk "A Fresh Look at Extrasensory Perception".

ABRAMS:

Some months ago I was conducting a routine experiment in hypnosis, using an Oxford undergraduate as my subject. I decided to see if I could set up a post-hypnotic suggestion; that is, a hypnotically conditioned response that would persist in the waking state. I told the subject that his first cigarette after waking would taste foul. He woke up, took a puff on a cigarette and said it was vile. I gave him another, which tasted OK. There were several persons present and they became involved in an animated conversation, when I noticed the bad cigarette burning in the ash tray. I waited until the subject put down the OK cigarette and then switched cigarettes. He picked up the bad cigarette, thinking it was the OK one, and complained about its taste, which made him ill. We tried this several more times and always got the right answer. I was able to repeat this result with several other subjects.

This curious ability of hypnotized persons to discriminate between two cigarettes looks like "extrasensory perception", or ESP as I am going to call it from now on - response to an external event or idea where ordinary communication is blocked out. I am not much worried about whether "ESP" really worked in this instance. The important thing was that the incident suggested new departures in research.

Previously, evidence for ESP had been based on experiments in card guessing, where subjects tried to reproduce the order of a pack of cards out of sight and hearing. In some experiments the odds in favour of ESP and against chance coincidence were of the order of billions to one. But these results proved difficult to repeat, and there is reason to believe that such experiments

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do not exploit the full range of ways in which ESP might appear and that they, in fact, put serious obstacles in its way. Certainly card guessing is only a faint, if sometimes persistent, echo of spontaneous ESP experiences, such as having a clear vision of circumstances surrounding the death of a relative or friend.

Consider the ways in which cigarette tasting differs from card guessing. The subject is not told to "try" to "guess" correctly; the answer occurs to him through involuntary activation of a conditioned sensory process. This resembles the spontaneous cases, where the subject does not deliberately invoke ESP but allows it to occur. Thus hypnosis suggests itself as a particularly favourable experimental environment. Hypnotized subjects' motivations are easily manipulated over a wider range, and the experimenter has special control over his subject's actions and attention. Lord Kelvin once said that half of hypnosis and clairvoyance was imposture and the rest bad observation. He may have been completely wrong.

A program of ESP research began at Oxford University last year in the newly established parapsychological laboratory. One of the projects under way involves putting people into hypnotic sleep and waking them up by "thought transference". Our initial success in this project was again fortuitous. I had told a hypnotized subject, a girl studying at the Sorbonne, that she would lapse into a trance when I clapped my hands, a convenient shortcut for re-hypnosis. I was sitting in a cabaret that she was also visiting, and several times she went into a trance, and I had to go to her table and wake her. Each time the band finished playing a number I joined in the applause, and this faint stimulus apparently put her in a trance. She might have heard me clap, but under better conditions, where sensory perception was ruled out, I was able to put her to sleep and awaken her at a distance of 100 yards and across several rooms. Similar experiments were conducted in France in the nineteenth century, and have recently been repeated in Leningrad with elaborate recording apparatus and careful precautions against experimental error.

The Oxford research group are particularly interested in the use of ESP signals to initiate simple conditioned reflexes. The subject might clap his hands or burst into laughter - knowing what he is doing, but not controlling his actions - when a light flashes on in a sealed box or an experimenter in another room thinks of a code word. In choosing the reflex behaviour we want to study, we are exploring simple modes of sensory experience, such as taste and touch.

The possibility of "transmitting" drawings of simple objects by ESP is also under study, and special mathematical techniques have been devised to analyze the results. Copying drawings by ESP is obviously not a hit or miss proposition, but some information apparently gets through, often in distorted or disguised form. On one occasion a subject responded to a picture of a church by drawing a horse. But the horse was of the same shape as the outline of the church, and in fact had spots on it representing, I think, windows. We are therefore studying the associations of the subjects and the distortions and symbolism of their responses to explore the principles and dynamics of more complex extrasensory perceptions.

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The new experimental work I have cited gives my colleagues and me reason to believe that a reliable source of high grade ESP may have been tapped in experiments concerned with involuntary responses of hypnotized subjects. It is difficult to suggest a mechanism by which these and other ESP effects might occur. Perhaps ESP information is propagated by radio waves of some unknown frequency. This is a possibility suggested before the turn of the century by Sir William Crookes and, curiously enough, by Mark Twain. It has received serious consideration in Russia, where ESP subjects have been placed in electromagnetically shielded chambers which cancel out radio waves. In most of the Russian research these chambers seemed to cancel out ESP as well and so to support the "mental radio" hypothesis. But in experiments in distance hypnosis conducted by Professor Leonid Vasiliev of Leningrad the use of lead chambers hermetically sealed with mercury had no effect on highly positive results.

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My own impression is that at the present stage of investigation, psychological explanations are likely to be of greater value in predicting and controlling ESP behaviour than investigations of hypothetical physical factors like radio waves. I am reminded of a classic experiment by J.G. Pratt and Jack Woodruff of Duke University who wished to study differences in card guessing scores as a function of the size of the symbols and found that the scores increased temporarily each time a new stimulus size was introduced into the experiment. They found evidence linking ESP with novelty, not with the size of symbols. This is a common finding in ESP research. The search for a physical dimension fails and ends in the discovery of a psychological dimension.

I am sure that many listeners find the concept of ESP unpalatable and perhaps impossible to swallow. I can only remind them of the advice the White Queen gave to Alice, who couldn't believe impossible things. "Try again; draw a long breath and shut your eyes." In this way the White Queen believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.

CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENT:

The last talk in "RESEARCH PROJECT" was given by Stephen Abrams, Director of the Oxford Parapsychological Laboratory.