SCIENCE, POLITICS, AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH[1]

by John Poynton

ABSTRACT

The Society for Psychical Research has experienced internal and external discord and political manoeuvring. This address dissects the situation under the headings of science, politics and psychical research. Science is characterised as a tentative, exploratory, puzzle-solving activity; yet a powerful drive to build speculative theories tends to obstruct free exploration and penetrating analysis. Attachment to theories can provoke an exercise of power, which leads to politics. The evidence for the occurrence of psi phenomena is massive, but there is the power-politics of several ideas set against the evidence, many rooted in the politics of the pack. Free science nevertheless has a creative glory such as shown in quantum theory, and which is evident in the best of psychical research. Yet, as in some other branches of science, psychical research has a political side to it; close parallels may be found in climate science, and the relationship between biology and conservationism. Persons taking entrenched sides regarding the paranormal are characterised as counter-advocates (the late Prof. Robert Morris's label for sceptics) or ultra-advocates (short on critical appraisal). Extremes of counter- and ultra-advocacy tend to inhibit the scientific job of impartially developing lines of evidence and subjecting them to analysis and testing. Limitations to research are evident; paraphrasing Bohr on physics, it may be said that psychical research is not necessarily an endeavour to discover what the paranormal is, but an endeavour to discover what we can say about it. This requires caution in the use of conventional language and conventional physicalistic thinking. If psychical research becomes fully engaged in deeper ontological levels including a scientific study of the non-physical, then radical thinking is needed such as that which produced relativity and quantum theories, where free science triumphed.

[1] This is a slightly updated version of the Presidential Address that was delivered on 25th October 2004.

INTRODUCTION

It is fifty-six years since an Honorary Secretary serving this Society has been elected President. In 1948 W. H. Salter, who was Honorary Secretary from the 1920s to the 1940s, was elected to "the distinguished roll of Presidents of this Society", as he put it. In his Presidential Address, he stated that he felt able to carry this honour "as a tribute to the work done for the Society by all who from its foundation have held the office of Hon. Secretary" (Salter, 1948). As a past Hon. Secretary I feel it a privilege to be able to share this sentiment and sense of honour. Salter observed that all Hon. Secretaries have recognised the effectiveness of organised, corporate activity in furthering the work of psychical research, which our Society has steadfastly provided. And I imagine that all of them have felt the forces of intolerance, partisanship and politics both within the Society and outside from standard science and the intellectual Establishment. In my address I therefore wish to focus on these three issues of science, politics, and psychical research.

In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* we hear that in married life, three is company and two is none. Can science, politics and psychical research be seen to bed down together as a threesome? Even two of them could be thought incompatible; when all three are put together, most people would rate them appalling bedfellows. In trying these three out in the one bed, first there is the difficulty of being clear exactly what one is talking about. The terms *science*, *politics* and *psychical research* might seem to be straightforward and unambiguous, but close scrutiny shows that this is not the case. There is a need to characterise these three clearly.

SCIENCE

It is perhaps noteworthy that the *Oxford Dictionary of Science* does not offer a definition of 'Science'. Science is in fact more difficult to define or characterise than most people think. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a number of different meanings with varying inclusiveness. The "dominant sense in ordinary use" is given as "those branches of study that relate to the phenomena of the material universe and their laws". The specification of a "material universe" implies that the study of out-of-body and near-death experiences, and mediumistic deliverances, are by definition not to be included in "science". This may give an easy ride for debunkers, but I do not think it encapsulates what most practising scientists actually experience as science, since it does not touch on attitude and method. Thomas Kuhn, in his seminal *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), argued that "the dominant criterion for

most members of a scientific group" is the "ability to set up and to solve puzzles presented by nature". This is not too different from Karl Popper's (1972) view that the aim of science is "of ever discovering new, deeper, and more general problems, and of subjecting its ever tentative answers to ever renewed and ever more rigorous tests".

In practice this is broadly what science is: a tentative, exploratory, puzzle-solving activity, with evolving methods to carry it out. Yet this is combined with an obsessive drive to build theories, and to be bound by them to the extent of obstructing free exploration and puzzle-solving. Over sixty years ago a past President of this Society, G. N. M. Tyrrell, wrote in his *The Personality of Man* (1947) that, "when the real test comes, [the scientist] proves himself to be an *a priori* theorist at heart . . . Theory first; appeal to fact afterwards!" Things have not changed; one might even think they have got worse when one reads in *Scientific American* that "science has unequivocally demonstrated" that people cannot exhibit telepathy and clairvoyance (Shermer, 2004).What brand of "science" are we reading about here? To see science as deadeningly theory-bound or harbouring entrenched ignorance might not seem a very generous view, but if I turn to the second of my trio, politics, some justification for this view may appear.

POLITICS

The word 'Politics' also has a number of entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The sense I take up is reflected in a quotation from Carey's *God Save the King:* "Confound their politiks, Frustrate their knavish tricks". This sense has to do with scheming, manipulation, tyranny, betrayal: politics is ultimately about the exercise of power, or the attempt to dodge it in some way. One may ask, can tyranny be seen to bed down with chaste, truth-seeking science? And I imagine most members of this Society would ask the same thing about psychical research: can our subject be bedded with partisan politics and scheming?

To find an answer, let us first consider science and politics, and then look at psychical research against this background. There are two primary ingredients both in science and in politics that may seem obvious but which are usually overlooked: people and ideas. Science is often thought of as impersonal, but it is not; science as it is practised is made of people, each with their own prejudices, styles, fears, likes, dislikes, and, of course, ambition and the politics that go with it. Ambition might not only be for personal promotion but also for the promotion or retention of a cherished theory or idea, and when ambition for personal power and for the power of an idea combine, one has a particularly nasty mix.

I was introduced to a mix of this kind early in my career as a biogeographer. The geology of the southern continents gives compelling

evidence that these land masses were joined at some time in the past. But if you attended a conference in North America before the 1960s and pointed this out, you would be met with scorn and derision. The leading geologists — those in power — maintained a theory of the structure of the earth's crust that ruled out the possibility of continents wandering like scum over the surface of the earth. So powerful was their grip that even in the southern hemisphere one professor of geology in the 1940s worriedly mentioned the possibility of continental drift to his students only in the privacy of his study, even though any geological map virtually screamed out the evidence for drift. One could imagine that one of his students seeking a position in an American university would have kept his mouth shut on this matter if he hoped for employment or for funding. The student would be up against nothing short of power politics: the high and mighty of the geological establishment embodying the power of an idea, and no doubt also the power of personal reputation and standing. Nowadays, of course, a student would have no hope of a position were he or she to dispute the idea of continental drift.

One can cite many similar cases; this one sticks more in my mind because I lived through it. We seem to be living through much the same situation with psychical research at the moment. The evidence for the occurrence of psi phenomena surely is massive, but there is the power-politics of several ideas set against accepting the evidence. There is the background power of pervasive materialism, and the more proximate power of ideas such as from neuroscience, which, with the philosophical laxity prevalent in standard science, rules out the possibility of mental events operating independently of the brain. It is not difficult to show flaws both in philosophical materialism and in neurological determinism, but that is not really what matters; here there is a set pattern of thinking, or ruling paradigm, that will proof itself against all conflicting evidence and ideas, a paradigm that may be dislodged only by the kind of mental switch identified in Kuhn's study on the structure of scientific revolutions. Kuhn, we may be reminded, saw the history of science as a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by revolutions, each revolution replacing one set of theories and procedures by another. During a tradition-bound period there is "a strenuous and devoted attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes provided by professional education". But a crisis develops as anomalies and unsolvable puzzles accumulate to the point where they cannot be ignored; eventually the rickety old set of views becomes supplanted by another set, and things settle down once more to a period of work secure within the confines of the new paradigm — normal science, as Kuhn termed it. The paradigm switch tends to be messy and irrational; often the revolution is set off by a band of fairly influential Young Turks, and is completed only when those attached to the old paradigm retire from their laboratories and die.

In a recent review in *Nature*, Michael Goldman (2003) wrote that "science is driven by politics, and politics by fear". One could complete a syllogism by deducing that science is driven by fear, a conclusion that most scientists would not accept, unless they had suffered under some kind of oppressive political regime. Nevertheless, it may be argued that the failure of standard science to take psi phenomena on board is rooted in this tangled web. Like most people, a scientist feels uncomfortable in foreign conceptual landscapes; also, within his community he does not like to feel isolated, deviant, odd, a subject of ridicule. It is reassuring to be the member of a pack, and debunking the paranormal is an effective way of securing a place in the pack, and for that matter of achieving favourable media exposure. When discussing psi debunkers, Tyrrell (1947) asked in exasperation, "What is the matter with all these people?" The matter with them, surely, is that they *are* people, people who are generally fearful of being counted outside the pack. Apart from the matter of pack status, those who practise science, being people, tend to base their security in being moored to a familiar paradigm, being programmed, doing almost anything to avoid waking to their real freedom and to the creative glory of free science. By free science I mean the kind of enterprise that gained hold during the early years of quantum theory, when there was a constellation of free and bold creative genius.

PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

I believe that a case can be made for including the best of psychical research in the creative glory of free science. To pursue this case, a workable definition or characterisation of psychical research is needed. A few years ago there was some debate on this issue in our *Journal*. I attempted a definition that I do not find very satisfactory (Poynton, 1996). It might seem surprising that in its place I choose something from the *Skeptical Inquirer,* namely a statement from the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP),[2] a body generally regarded as being hostile to psychical research. CSICOP, it is claimed, "encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public". I believe that this statement is effectively indistinguishable from the objects for which the Society for Psychical Research was established, as published in its *Memorandum of Association* of 1895. Yet CSICOP and SPR members accuse each other of conducting bad science, either on the side of ignoring evidence or of distorting it. Now surely, one might say, if the

[2] Now rebranded as the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI).

aims and objects of two scientifically orientated bodies are the same, then their publications should be expected to be mutually supportive and in sweet harmony. Yet I would say that the existing antagonism and disharmony need come as no surprise to those who have had a lifetime in the politicising gangland of academia. While a few in that gangland consider science and psychical research to be coupled in union, most still find them incompatible bedfellows; it depends on which paradigm one happens to be settled in.

Perhaps I could be charged with showing a degree of scepticism — if not cynicism — that outpaces almost anything one may read in the *Skeptical Inquirer.* So a brief account of how I got to this position would be in place. As an undergraduate I had no particular interest in the paranormal, and possessed a well-thumbed copy of A. J. Ayer's radically positivist *Language, Truth and Logic* (1946). I was a member of the Rationalist Press Association, and subscribed to their humanist magazine. What rocked my boat was the discovery that homeopathy worked brilliantly with our dogs. I could not argue the effect away as due to placebos and suggestibility, and more was to come when I found that homeopathy was most effective when diagnosis and prescription were carried out by the use of dowsing.

Neither of these phenomena makes any sense in the ruling scientific paradigms. How can a sample of dog's hair and a pendulum reveal what is wrong with the animal and how best to treat it? How can a virtually terminal dilution of a substance actually enhance physiological action? The evidence-suppressing theorist identified by Tyrrell must either ignore the effects or argue the evidence away. This is the standard path to take in the scientific world during a period of what Kuhn recognised as tradition-bound, 'normal' science, but it struck me as being a betrayal of the free spirit of science, and I took a contrary path that has led to my addressing this Society tonight. My interest logically moved to radiesthesia, as medical dowsing is called, and after that to the study of out-of-body experiences and purported spirit communication both in an African and a European setting. Some cases were very unconvincing, others very convincing, but when I reported cases that I found significant to a humanist journal, my paper was sent back with an editorial comment that the paper would "annoy" the readers. I took this to be a symptom of phobic intellectual blindness, so I could only respond by withdrawing my subscription to *The Humanist,* and resigning from the Rationalist Press Association. I still retain a degree of distaste for similar journals current at the moment; to my mind one sees here a betrayal of free science and rationality, free, that is, from the constraints of mind-set and the instruments of politics.

With such conspicuous public disagreement about whether psi phenomena exist or not, data-suppression and politics are inevitably brought

into the debate. Psychical research is not unique in this respect; there are several areas in science where the existence or strength of phenomena fall into question, and so get tumbled into the political arena. The tumble of climate science into polemics is a notable example of where science and politics may be found tussling in the same bed, very much for worse rather than better. The relationship between biology and conservationism is another unhelpful political bedroom. Conservationism has its committed protagonists, for example the Greens, and its committed antagonists, for example developers. The very existence of data is hotly disputed in this arena. When argument narrows down to whether a waterfall should be retained as a unique spray-maintained habitat or turned into a hydroelectric plant, one may be disheartened by the confounding politics and knavish tricks that both sides get up to in the pursuit of their cause, completely outside the strict bounds of scientific thinking. The term 'enthusiasm' comes to mind, specifically the meaning that the word had during the eighteenth-century period of the Enlightenment, when reason and critical appraisal were pitted against extravagant and unbalanced fervour, the latter being discredited as 'enthusiasm'. The approach to psi phenomena has enthusiasts both on the anti and the pro sides. The late Professor Bob Morris used the term "counter-advocates" for the sceptical antis (Smith 1993); perhaps one could use the term "ultra-advocates" for those whose credulity stretches beyond critical appraisal. Probably the majority of psychical researchers do not wish to be dragged into counter- and ultra-advocate polemics any more than biologists wish to become involved in conservationist controversy and politicising. But while the detrimental effects of such controversy are relatively limited in biology, in the case of psychical research, deep divisions between counter and ultra advocacy have always existed, and create a potentially dangerous fault-line in our Society. During my time as Honorary Secretary I have, for example, received letters of resignation from the Society both on the grounds of its neglecting survival issues and of being over-preoccupied with them.

I would say that this conflict and faction-forming is the result of misunderstanding the proper nature of scientific societies, which should be above the politics of advocacy and the pursuit of causes. Yet in practice, scientific societies are rarely free of personal agendas, discord, advocacy and the politics of partisanship, because science after all is made of people, and people continually engage in such things. Academic standards and competence are no safeguard against this, as anyone who has taught in an academic department will know. The finely-honed tools of intellect can be used as the most horrifying partisan weapons, and the threads that maintain the continuance of some scientific societies have been severed by such weaponry. Yet this can become a far greater peril in societies that encompass a wider field than pure science, where

members may have commitments to causes outside immediate scientific issues. Conservationist factions and infighting within a zoological or botanical society can tear the society apart if there is a demand that research furthers some particular agenda. The society may be accused of 'not doing its job', when the job of a scientific society is simply to safeguard and promote high standards of impartial research in its field, as far as is humanly possible.

Psychical research, then, is not unique among the sciences in having attached to it an area that takes on more the characteristics of religion than impartial science. This has been a tendency throughout the history of our Society; William James for example wrote of "the passion for immortality which rules Myers" (Beer, 2003), and one could say that Frederic Myers's rapturous acceptance of the mediumistic deliverances of Leonore Piper impaired his judgement about the significance of the Piper communications. Mrs Piper herself appeared to be unconvinced that the 'messages' came from deceased persons rather than telepathically from the living (Haynes, 1982), and the great survivalist breakthrough for psychical research that Myers expected from the Piper sittings did not materialise.

TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM

Myers and his colleagues often expressed dissatisfaction at the failure of psychical research to make substantial inroads into the prevailing world of science, and at the beginning of our own century the situation shows little improvement. The hand of politics is very evident if one sees current science as a nest of paradigms that have tended to smother the free growth of science in our direction. It is not unreasonable to anticipate a Kuhnian revolution that will rid us of these nested paradigms, but because there is little rationality involved in these revolutions, it is hardly possible to say when and how such a revolution will take place, or even that it will immediately favour psychical research. Yet as long as psychical research continues in its best tradition of painstaking, focused and impartial investigation, we can add to the store of anomalies that discomfort those who are empowered by the current materialistic paradigm. As Kuhn pointed out, it is the accumulation of anomalies that eventually brings a paradigm down. We can be reasonably confident of ultimate success, as long as we keep to the charge of open-minded investigation given us by the founders of our Society.

One may bear in mind that our Society was founded as a society for research. Whatever one may understand the adjective 'psychical' to mean in the name 'Society for Psychical Research', the word 'research' is unambiguous and crucial. The *Oxford Popular English Dictionary* has a useful definition of the word 'research': "systematic investigation and

study in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions". Facts established in psychical research have tended to be in conflict with entrenched conclusions, either sceptical or over-credulous. Yet as Henry Sidgwick (1883) said in the first Presidential Address to this Society, "any particular investigation that we may make should be carried on with a single-minded desire to ascertain the facts, and without any forgone conclusion as to their nature". He acknowledged that in his audience were some who felt that psychical research "can only lead to the proof of most of the alleged phenomena; some, again, think it probable that most, if not all, will be disproved; but regarded as a Society, we are quite unpledged".

We may nevertheless recognise the limitations of research. One could paraphrase a comment that Niels Bohr made about physics, by saying that psychical research is not necessarily an endeavour to discover what the paranormal is, but an endeavour to discover what we can say about it. And we should be ready to accept that we cannot say nearly enough if we confine ourselves to conventional language and conventional physicalistic thinking and research programmes. We have to try to speak clearly in terms of altered states of awareness, and of many different worlds of experience beyond the physical world. That means we have to understand how awareness brings into manifestation *any* kind of world, which takes us back through a long loop to the kind of multi-level physics that Bohr and his associates were trying to characterise, about actualisations at one level, and of potentiality or causal substructure at some other level.

Here we are at the threshold of a more fundamental enquiry than conventional thinking is used to. The deep psychological explorations of one of our members, Peter Chadwick (1997), led him to infer that "the essential nature of reality is not singularly material but psychophysical", with a "potential-to-actual conversion", one that is "in parallel with similar concerns about this issue in quantum physics". As Chadwick and several other writers have pointed out, it is in this deep area of experience that psychology and physics can find a meeting point. For here we are at a primordial level of creativity, as our late member Michael Whiteman has shown (e.g. Whiteman, 1986), especially in identifying common "structures of creativity" underlying psychology and physics and thereby unifying them. 'Parapsychology' as a standard alternative term for 'psychical research' then seems restrictive in this broad context which ranges from pure psychology to the processes of "potential-to-actual conversion". If 'psychology' may be thought to include the study of claimed paranormal beliefs and experiences without making any presumptions about the existence of 'the paranormal' or the operation of psi, then 'parapsychology' could be thought to take a step further by considering whether these beliefs and experiences could be based on

non-physical events or processes. This is not the same as the study of such occurrences themselves, which could be separately identified and termed 'paraphysics', where thinking in terms of potential-to-actual conversion and multi-level systems of generation becomes necessary. Finally the term 'paracosmology' could refer to the broadest study of the manifestation of any world and its objects on any occasion of observation in a variety of states, such as recorded in out-of-body and near-death experiences (Poynton, 2008). The latter involves the scientific study of non-physical worlds which authors such as Charles Tart (1997) have called for.

As all of these categories can be thought of as involving the operation of psyche (even if this may be denied in standard psychology), then the term 'psychical research' seems suitable to include them all, and all can be integrated within the procedures of science, as writers such as Chadwick and Whiteman have pointed out. To engage psychical research in deeper ontological levels as a scientific study of the non-physical, we should be open to bold investigative and analytic approaches to our subject, as comprehensive and radical as those which produced relativity and quantum theories in the past century, where free science triumphed. Then we may find that the various fields of psychical research become core areas of study within the realm of a new science. This seems to be no less than what the founders of our Society hoped for, and charged us with attaining.

14 Mordern House
Harewood Avenue
London NW1 6NR

REFERENCES

Ayer, A. J. (1946) *Language, Truth and Logic (2nd edition).* London: Victor Gollancz.

Chadwick, P. (1997) *Schizophrenia: The Positive Perspective, in search of Dignity for Schizophrenic People.* London: Routledge.

Goldman, M. A. (2003) Darwin's children. *Nature 424,* 726.

Haynes, R. (1982) *The Society for Psychical Research 1882–1982: A History.* London: Macdonald.

Kuhn, T. S. (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd edition).* University of Chicago Press.

Popper, K. R. (1972) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery.* London: Hutchinson.

Poynton, J. C. (1996) Towards a statement of purpose for the Society for Psychical Research. *JSPR 61,* 94–102.

Poynton, J. C. (2008) Towards a taxonomy of psi investigation. *JSPR 72,* 60–62.

Salter, W. H. (1948) Presidential Address. *Proc SPR 48,* 239–252.

Shermer, M. (2004) Miracle on probability street. *Scientific American 291 (2),* 21.

Sidgwick, H. (1883) Presidential Address. *Proc SPR 1,* 7–12.

Smith, M. D. (1993) Edinburgh International Science Festival Parapsychology Conference. *The Psi Researcher No 10.*

Tart, C. T. (1997) On the scientific study of non-physical worlds. In Tart, C. T. (ed.) *Body Mind Spirit: Exploring the Parapsychology of Spirituality.* Charlottesville: Hampton Books.

Tyrrell, G. N. M. (1947) *The Personality of Man: New Facts and their Significance.* West Drayton: Pelican Books.

Whiteman, J. H. M. (1986) *Old and New Evidence on the Meaning of Life, Vol. 1. An Introduction to Scientific Mysticism.* Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe.