

WHAT ARE COINCIDENCES?

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"This whole question of coincidence is one that plagues psychic research." R. Targ and H. Puthoff, *Mind-reach. Scientists look at psychic ability*, 143. London, 1977.

An Australian Society for Psychic Research has been formed, following a meeting at La Trobe University, Melbourne, on 26 November 1977, which I attended. The talks given reflected the serious interest in psychical research in Australia, and provided evidence of bountiful data.

Perhaps the best talk was given by Charles Osborne, of the Caulfield Institute of Technology, Melbourne, who has been researching with colleagues on the metallurgy of (apparently) psychically bent metal. The profusion of information in this and other areas of psychical research led Osborne to make a beautiful contrast with current work in physics on the J-particle. Twenty million photographs had so far been taken, he said, and only 20 revealed evidence of the alleged particle. Truly a one-in-a-million effect, which could be due to anything; but this is Respectable Physics, so masses of well-financed "research" into the particle is under way. But work into the proliferating psychic phenomena is mostly self-financed by the researchers, and often despised by others. The irony of this contrast led Osborne to the perfect remark about psychic phenomena: "they happen so often, they *must* be fraudulent!"

The problem of the frequency of occurrence of events has always been at the heart of the philosophy of probability. What are the "chances" that some event(s) can occur? If it does occur, can it "only" be a coincidence? The usual understanding of the concept of coincidence is that two or more events take place in some strikingly correlative way (for example, more or less simultaneously), but each event inhabits its own causative framework, disjoint from the frameworks of the other event(s). One challenge to this view has arisen in science itself, with claims that the world may not be entirely causatively structured but, in part at least, is actually statistical. Another challenge came with the concerns of psychic phenomena in mind, when Jung offered his "acausal connecting principle" of synchronicity to explain some apparently "coincidental" features of life.

My own interest in coincidences is based on my frequent experience of them: I appear to be "coincidence-prone", whatever that means. There is a saying that things happen in threes, but mine are

usually twos: a constant succession of pairs involving all aspects of daily life, mostly mundane and unworthy of further discussion. In addition, in many cases elementary calculation of probabilities shows that the chances of their occurrence are much *better* than one might imagine. But some coincidences are "long-shots" by any probabilistic standards.

My initial awareness of coincidences was due to the fact that during every summer holiday I would meet someone from my school in Huddersfield, no matter where we went. The best example was itself a pair: within an hour we passed a master and his family in their car and overtook three boys from the year above me on bicycles while driving in mid-Wales. (The two groups were not together, and did not meet: I checked this the next term.) With an exception to be described below, striking coincidences did not recur until about eight years ago. This is the period during which I have been interested in psychic phenomena. Is that a coincidence?

There have been many cases of running into friends and acquaintances in unexpected places, meeting people who had surprising mutual contacts, finding references to relevant matters of interest without looking for them, and so on. I confine my descriptions to six cases which have stood out. Each was witnessed by at least one other person.

Toronto, August 1961. I spent some months there before returning to England via New York. "Goodbye, Edgar," I said to a friend who was leaving to take up theological studies in New York City somewhere, "I'll see you in New York then." My remark surprised me as much as him; but there he was on the pavement six weeks later when I was looking around Columbia University.

Windsor, September 1969. A second-hand bookshop was as unrewarding inside as it had seemed from without. But through an open doorway at the back I could see a wall lined with much better stuff, so I went through to look—and a little later I was suddenly looking at another wall of books, at right angles to the first one and not visible from the main shop. I seemed to have picked out a book called *Bonaparte, Governor of Egypt* by F. Charles-Roux. I opened it once, twice; and there was a reproduction of a contemporary drawing of Fourier, a civilian member of the French campaign of 1798–1801. Fourier later became a prominent mathematician, the inventor of "Fourier analysis". I was writing a book on Fourier at the time, and this drawing later appeared in it (see my and J. R. Ravetz, *Joseph Fourier 1768–1830*, 15 and 503. Cambridge, Mass., 1972.)

Perth (Australia), 7 June 1976 (in the form 7.6.76, itself a pair!). Among many coincidences that day, the most interesting occurred when I took a break in a staffroom at the university from looking up

references on Fibonacci numbers, a branch of mathematics with applications in aesthetics, architecture and biology. An old copy of *Private Eye* seemed to be a suitable accompaniment for the coffee; and in "Pseuds corner", a collection of pompous announcements, I saw reprinted an advertisement for a lecture where the speaker would describe her new ideas on neurophysiology derived from using random Fibonacci numbers . . . I wrote a letter about this interesting day three days later to a friend called John Crossley, and then went to check on a reference in the *British Museum Catalogue* in the university library. The volume I used fell open at "John Crossley (Methodist)".

Melbourne, 9 September 1977. This case may not seem to belong to coincidences; I shall say later why I have included it. John Crossley, Professor of Mathematics at Monash University, Melbourne, is interested in psychic phenomena. (He spoke at the meeting described above.) He arranged a visiting lectureship for me at the university, and soon after I arrived we went along to a meeting of various people (including Osborne) with a local spoon-bender, Ori Suoray. We gave Ori keys and metal. He bent one key a bit after much effort, but was on the whole fairly unsuccessful. I went with him alone into another room, and we chatted for about 20 minutes while he worked on a key which I gave him out of the desk in my room, and some other things. He may have bent that key very slightly, but said that it was the type of small key with which he is usually unsuccessful; and he certainly did nothing to two other keys from the desk which I kept in my possession as controls. But I have great respect for spoon-benders, and I had left my key-ring and watch in the glove compartment of John's car before we crossed over to the building for the meeting. When we came back to the car I took my watch and keys out of the glove compartment. The watch was still going, but one of the keys was bent by at least 5°! Moreover, it was the fourth of the set for my desk, the one that I used. Like the other three, it was originally completely flat, and of the type that Ori said he didn't like working with! I am sure that I did not tell him that I had left my keys and watch in John's car, and the car was guarded by a rather aggressive dog during our absence.

Rotorua (New Zealand), 31 October 1977. My time at Monash University was interrupted by a lecture tour of New Zealand. A day off was spent at Rotorua, a centre for thermal areas of mud pools, boiling lakes, and craters. Just before visiting a buried village, I thought briefly about a history of mathematical physics which I was planning. It involves the transmission of certain ideas from France to England in the 1830s, and I made a mental note to look at Charles Babbage's *Reflections on the decline of science in England* (1830) as a source of relevant information. One of the exhibits in the village, which I

then visited, contains a few books that were found there. One of them was the *Report* of the inaugural (1831) meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science; and it was open at a page where Babbage's book is mentioned.

Melbourne, 8 December 1977. I was sent a paper to referee for a journal. The author had traced an important collection of manuscripts to their probable destruction in a fire at a mine at Vollpriehausen, Germany, in 1945. I read the paper quickly and then had to go into Melbourne to look at the University of Melbourne's holdings of old mathematical books. While in the library stacks, I passed by a bookcase filled with thousands of booklets. I took one out to see what they were, and found them to be a series of reports prepared by the British and the Americans about the German economy and industry at the end of the war. The one that I had selected was the second of three on the adaptation of existing underground installations. It fell open on page 5—where there is a description of a mine at Vollpriehausen.

An initial response to such coincidences must relate them to *conscious* intentions and circumstances. I am impressed by the *details* involved in these events, and the undoubted *obscurities* that they concern. The first case, of meeting Edgar in New York, is the only one of conscious anticipation—made, I might add, with a strong inner certainty which I have never forgotten. With regard to the Fourier example, I knew enough about his work in Egypt from primary sources to make it most unlikely to seek out a book like Charles-Roux's (indeed, the drawing was its only new relevant item for me); but had I not seen the book, I would certainly not have found the drawing. Concerning the information in *Private Eye*, I rarely read it and I found no such items in the various other issues which I then sought out. The key-ring case differs from the others in that an effect was consciously being attempted; but the mode of causality was so unorthodox that the event can as "reasonably" be explained in terms of coincidence as by some (neo-causative) theory of telekinesis. The Rotorua example has a precognitive flavour to it, especially as Babbage's book is not likely to be useful for the purpose that I had in mind (hence some other reason for its consideration needs to be sought), and the 1831 British Association *Report* is a pretty rare work anywhere, never mind in a small village that was largely inhabited by Maoris. With regard to the Vollpriehausen mine, I do have some knowledge of German document storage in the last war (this was why I was sent the paper to referee), but I had never heard of the vast collection of pamphlets, quite apart from selecting probably the only relevant one.

To pass from these "surface" considerations to deeper levels of

comment is a difficult task. From these and other examples, I have the following views on coincidences.

(1) They must be one of the most difficult of all psychic phenomena to study: they seem to occur in any aspect of life, usually without anticipation, and rarely with significant order or timing. I think of coincidences as a kind of *converse telepathy*: instead of two people sharing the same event, two events are sharing the same person. This is *why* this area is so difficult to diagnose: the effect does not reside in the person in the same way as it does in many other psychic phenomena.

(2) A further difficulty is that coincidences are a *residual category even among psychic phenomena*, which themselves are a residual category relative to phenomena as a whole. Thus a *double dose* of incoherence and disparateness surrounds them. Hence a classification of coincidences is essential. Among the six described above, for example, I would regard both the Edgar and the Rotorua cases as precognitive, but the latter only nascently so. The metal-bending example is a type of apparent telekinesis reported by others, where the desired effect occurs but at a distance and in an unintended manner. The Fourier, *Private Eye* and Vollpriehausen cases almost have the flavour of remote view or travelling out of the body, although this does not explain how the information obtained happened to be in the current piece of space-time in the first place. This qualification is important. I doubt if all coincidences can be *fully* reduced to other kinds of (psychic and orthodox) phenomena; hence they form some category of their own.

(3) As a corollary to the need to break down this doubly incoherent category, it is particularly dangerous to seek for any *overall* or holistic explanation of coincidences. While individual or small sequences of coincidences may find a context in which to express their coherence, there is surely *no* Overall Picture of which they are part. John Crossley put this point (which applies also to other psychic phenomena) to me in the form: "These things are significant, but they don't mean anything" (in a global sense).

(4) As usual with psychic phenomena, persons prone to coincidence may have some particular way of experiencing them which is worth noting. (I am good at unexpectedly meeting people, and also at opening books at the right place.) It may be worth studying the coincidence-prone for other phenomena to which they may be susceptible (I am not aware of any in myself), and also the degree of ubiquity of coincidences (a particularly difficult task of classification and statistical assessment).

(5) A major methodological difficulty with explanations based on ideas like synchronicity is that they take the status of *unfalsifiable* theories. As Popper has shown (*Conjectures and refutations*, ch. 8.

London, 1963), there are special difficulties involved in handling unfalsifiable theories, especially when several such theories *compete* together (for example, determinism versus indeterminism, or solipsism versus realism). Such a situation can arise when the synchronicist is faced by the sceptic who automatically regards any alleged phenomena as fraud, hoax, or whatever; for the sceptic's view is also existential ("there exists an ordinary explanation . . .") and therefore also unfalsifiable. In fact, the sceptic who says that he will not believe in psychic phenomena even if they actually happen is effectively a solipsist. The best to hope for with an unfalsifiable theory is to see what problems it solves, eases and/or exacerbates. I prefer the synchronicists to the sceptics, but their intellectual record so far does not seem to me to be impressive. For example, I think that reconciliation of synchronicity with physics will resolve only *some* aspects of the problems which coincidences present.

(6) In comment on a draft of this paper, Dr. Jule Eisenbud has urged me to consider the psi hypothesis as an alternative to synchronistic explanations. According to this view, the experient utilizes his postulated psi faculty to choose from the current or nascent events and states of affairs in his space-time neighbourhood some which, in conjunction, appear to be a "coincidence" but which in fact are fulfilling some pressing aim or relieving (or at least tempering) a current stress. (Normally, no claim is made that the experient has induced the existence of the relevant events or states of affairs.) This type of explanation contrasts with synchronicity in accepting causality: it is the aims or stresses which cause the psi faculty to spring into action.

Most, if not all, of my cases described above could be fitted into the psi hypothesis; but there may be as much strength as weakness here in its explanatory power, for Popper's caveat about unfalsifiable theories applies thrice. First, the psi hypothesis asserts the existence of some aim to be fulfilled or stress to be relieved; but this can lead the analyst to indefinitely deep quarrying in the experient's psyche for motivations. Secondly, the hypothesis postulates the existence of an ontology of events and states of affairs—sometimes forthcoming ones. Thirdly, it assumes the existence of the psi faculty itself. Synchronicity is more modest in its existential claims, although much vaguer in its means of operation.

(7) A rather interesting type of coincidence is that of *coincidences of the second order*: coincidences involving coincidences. A good example has just happened to me: while writing the last section I was also listening to a radio programme, in which the reporter mentioned several times the coincidences that had occurred to her during its preparation. The "purpose" of this type of coincidence may be to

emphasize to the experient that "coincidences", whatever they are, do in fact happen. Thus the statal ontology mentioned in the last section has to include coincidences among its postulated states of affairs.

Two final questions. If coincidences "plague" psychic phenomena, as Targ and Puthoff assert, do they do so as intrinsic components or as unwelcome interference? If psychic phenomena happen so often that they must be fraudulent, as Osborne ironically remarked, then are coincidences fraudulent also?

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

While most writers on psychic phenomena mention coincidences, few explore the concept in depth. Here are some of the most penetrating studies so far published.

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