



The “Attitude of Incredulity”

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Recently, in a published debate between Rupert Sheldrake and Michael Schermer (1), Schermer opined, “In general, over the course of a century of research on psi, the tighter the controls on the experimental conditions, the weaker the psi effects seem to become until they disappear entirely. This is a very strong indicator that ESP is not real.” And then, “there is no explanatory theory for how psi works. Until proponents can explain how thoughts generated by neurons in the sender’s brain can pass through the skull and into the brain of the receiver, skepticism is the appropriate response.”

Sheldrake, in his response, maintained that Schermer’s first opinion is simply not true, and secondly, that “There are already several hypotheses as to how psi may work, but they offend your authoritarian instincts because they go beyond existing scientific orthodoxy.” This point could have been made more strongly: Schermer’s view is encased in a one-level naturalism that assumes -without any supporting evidence - that thoughts are generated by neurons, and that there would be some physical transmission of thoughts.

One could say that the debate laboured over trampled ground without indicating anything more than deadlock. Sheldrake remarked, “I wish there was a way to move our argument forward.” Regrettably there is nothing new in this stalemate; one may think back to the oft-quoted passage from the inaugural presidential address to the Society for Psychical Research, delivered in 1882 by Henry Sidgwick (2): “I say it is a scandal that the dispute as to the reality of [psi] phenomena should still be going on, that so many competent witnesses should have declared their belief in them, that so many others should be profoundly interested in having this question determined, and yet the educated world, as a body, should still be simply in the attitude of incredulity.”

The matter of evidence

A man of great philosophical eminence, Sidgwick evidently had enough confidence in human rationality to “trust to the mass of evidence for conviction” to demolish the attitude of incredulity. In his second address of 1882 (3) he declared that if doubters in telepathy “will not yield to half-a-dozen decisive experiments by investigators of trained intelligence and hitherto unquestioned probity, let us try to give them half-a-dozen more recorded by other witnesses; if a dozen will not do, let us try to give them more; if a score will not do, let us make up the tale to fifty. The time and trouble will not be thrown away if only we can attain the end.”

The “mass of evidence” is now enormous and steadily increasing (4). Yet the “scandal” is still with us; denial, debunking is the ruling fashion of the day, from Wikipedia to “skeptical” publications. So while not downplaying the importance Sidgwick placed on facts, was there something that he missed?



He recognised that “Scientific incredulity has been so long in growing, and has so many and so strong roots, that we shall only kill it ... by burying it alive under a heap of facts.” (2). But the many and strong roots appeared to him to be something that objective and rational science could deal with if one just piled fact upon fact at a purely empirical level. He seemed to have missed what Abraham Maslow in 1966 termed “cognitive pathologies” (5). When a scientist finds himself out of depth or without bearings he will, Maslow wrote, be found “desperately and stubbornly hanging on to a generalization, in spite of new information that contradicts it.” It is a prime source of scientific incredulity.

Cognitive pathology

That the incredulity has many and strong roots could suggest some even deeper cognitive pathology than just the reaction of being faced with something new. It has to do with culture, taste, history, a kind of background dissonance with psi phenomena. One might have expected Sidgwick as a philosopher to tackle this directly, yet he appeared to have discussed it in only two places. The first is in his second presidential address (3). He considered a notion that aversion to psi phenomena is hard-wired in the brain (as we would now term it). This aversive notion appeared in an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* which “urged its readers to abstain from enquiring into ghost stories on account of the dangerous tendency to give them credence which, on the principles of evolution, must be held to exist in our brains.”

The article declared that we must starve such “morbid fibres” in the brain “by steadily refusing them the slightest nutriment in the way of apparent evidence... The scientific attitude can only be maintained by careful abstention from dangerous trains of thought.”

We still hear something like this today, and Sidgwick’s comment was that it is “the exact counterpart of the dissuasions which certain unwise defenders of religious orthodoxy, a generation ago, used to urge against the examination of the evidences of Christianity. They told us that owing to the inherited corruption of the human heart we had proneness to wrong belief which could only be resisted by ‘steadily neglecting to develop’ it; that we must keep clear of the pitch of free-thinking if we would avoid defilement; that, in short, the *religious* ‘attitude can only be preserved by careful abstention from dangerous trains of thought.’”

He recalled the “indignation with which our scientific teachers then repudiated these well-meant warnings, as involving disloyalty to the sacred cause of truth.” Yet they themselves were doing exactly the same thing with their own “obstinate incredulity” regarding psychical research. Sidgwick’s comment: “I thought how the whirligig of time brings round his revenges and how the new professor is ‘but the old priest writ large’ in a brand-new scientific jargon.” By no means has time’s whirligig stopped spinning.

This cognitive pathology is as relevant to the present as it was a hundred and thirty years ago - even to neurological fantasy, which has its present counterparts. But it does bring into question Sidgwick’s belief that the attitude of incredulity can be buried alive under a heap of facts. If it is hard-wired, then we have to fall back on the adage that change comes about in science only through the funerals of the old guard.

The legacy of Kant

Putting aside neurological fantasies, one still has to ask why it is that the attitude of incredulity exists and persists. Sidgwick touched on the question in a set of posthumously published lectures on Immanuel Kant (6). The most influential of the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophers, Kant’s anti-psi stance has cast a long shadow over psychical research. Sidgwick noted that Kant viewed telepathy as belonging to “concepts the possibility of which has nothing to rest on, because it is not founded on experience and its known laws.” Sidgwick’s comment was that Kant “does not exactly say that telepathy, etc., is impossible, but only that its possibility has nothing to rest on and cannot be tested.”

Kant could have set up experiments to do some testing, as did the SPR founders. But it seems that in Enlightenment times it was not the fashion to engage in empirical tests of psychic claims; reason should have priority over experience. This could seem a betrayal of true enlightenment. Kant declared in a document of 1784, “All spirits and ghosts, apparitions, dream interpretations, precognitions of the future, sympathy of souls are altogether a most objectionable delusion, for it does not allow itself to be explained through any rule or through comparative observations ... and even if real ghosts exist, a rational person must still not believe in them, because it corrupts all use of reason.”(7).

This seems as unenlightened as the *Pall Mall Gazette* advice about “careful abstention from dangerous trains of thought”. Kant’s idea of “a world not visible to us now but hoped for” (7) was central to his moral philosophy, yet, far from welcoming any empirical investigation into immortality, he rejected it in keeping with the attitude of the times. This is shown in his attack on the scientist-turned-seer Emanuel Swedenborg, who described visits to other worlds and conversing with spirits of “dead” people. Despite Swedenborg declaring his experiences to be *ex auditu et visis*, from hearing and seeing, Kant saw them as “fairy tales that a rational man hesitates to bear with patience.”(7).

All this is covered in an invaluable study of Kant’s thinking by Gregory Johnson (7). Apart from the cognitive pathology, Johnson pointed out that Kant’s attack on Swedenborg can be seen as a smear campaign that suited him. Swedenborg’s work could be dismissed either as objectionable medieval occultism or as Christian heresy, and for Kant, attack would help establish his position in academe as a critical thinker by associating himself with the sceptical tenets and attitudes of the times. This debunking strategy is still successfully followed to this day. The attitude of incredulity pays off.

What to do about it?

Then what is to be done about this “scandal”? Sidgwick undoubtedly was correct in maintaining that facts are the foundation of psychical research as a science. But a different

tactic needs to be used against the powerful Kantian legacy that a “rational person” must not believe in psi phenomena “because it corrupts all use of reason” (7).

It was an Enlightenment ideal to glorify “human reason”, but if reason is placed above raw observation and experience then what is there to distinguish it from prejudice and dogmatism? William James attempted to base philosophy on experience rather than reason, but unreformed thinking has continued in the cramping application of the “iron rule of the mechanistic regime”, decried by Jan Smuts in his seminal *Holism and Evolution* (8).

It seems that until we study and understand deeply the attitude of incredulity, there is little chance of resolving what grieved Sidgwick as the “dispute as to the reality of [psi] phenomena”, or find “a way to move our argument forward,” as Sheldrake wished. In a recent paper in the *Journal* of the SPR, Harvey Irwin asked, “Why, then, has the study of the origins of paranormal disbelief been so neglected?” (9). An intertwined complex of historical, psychological and philosophical factors seems involved; here surely is material for several PhD theses and larger works. Yet in his study of disbelief, Irwin made use of “one of the best documented psychological correlates of paranormal belief”, which distinguishes an “intuitive-experiential mode” from a “rational-analytic mode” of thinking style. But to separate “rational-analytic” from “experiential” modes is to recycle the Enlightenment pathology which Kant displayed so prominently. It serves the notion that disbelief in psi is coupled with “reason”, and belief is coupled with the irrational.

We need to understand precisely how this pernicious notion came about. We need to understand how and why cognitive pathologies insert themselves in a thinking style. The “study of the origins of paranormal disbelief” is unfinished business that cannot remain so neglected.

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References

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