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Extrasensory Perception

Chicanery in the spiritistic field has long been recognized and long been a bane to those who attempt to examine under controlled conditions the reality of the alleged powers of telepathy and clairvoyance. Among recent workers in this field, S. G. Soal of London and J. B. Rhine of Duke University have been the recognized leaders. They and their colleagues have conducted thousands and thousands of trials, with many subjects, under varied conditions, and have produced such a substantial body of data as to convince many a once skeptical critic that extrasensory phenomena do exist. A stellar example is Soal himself.

But the skeptics have not all been won over. In a paper entitled "Science and the supernatural," which we published on 26 August, George Price argued that some of the most widely accepted results could be duplicated—and hence could have been obtained—by fraudulent means and challenged the supporters of extrasensory perception to a "fraudproof" test.

Immediately we began to hear from readers. Angry letters told us how bad Price was for writing the article and we for publishing it. Congratulatory letters praised author and editor for their courage in frankly facing a difficult problem that sooner or later had to be explicitly handled. Letters in a milder tone elaborated one or another aspect of the controversy. Of all the letters submitted, we selected four for publication. They appear in this issue, together with Price's reply and a rejoinder by Rhine to Price's reply. These half-dozen papers mark the end of this particular episode, but no one expects them to end the debate on extrasensory perception.

The central issue is whether or not the possibility of fraud has been ruled out. Although each side offers strong arguments, neither is fully convincing. In the opening paper, Price argued that the results reported by Rhine and Soal are incompatible with accepted scientific principles and their vast body of supporting evidence. Price then proposed to explain those results by introducing the additional hypothesis of intentional or unconscious fraud. However, a contradiction between ESP reports and accepted science implies only that the truth of ESP claims is highly improbable, not that the claims are necessarily in error. What appears improbable on the basis of one body of evidence may prove to be quite probable when fresh evidence is discovered.

In the closing note of the exchange, Rhine argues that the fraudproof experiment proposed by Price would demonstrate nothing. Failure to reproduce ESP would show only that it is not a phenomenon that can be summoned at will. However, by summoning a little patience, science can deal with rare and ephemeral phenomena. One cannot reasonably expect to witness a rainbow or an earthquake whenever one chooses. If ESP is a fact, evidence should appear after trying a reasonable number of subjects and experiencing a reasonable number of failures, even under conditions guaranteed to exclude fraud.

However the ESP debate eventually comes out, certainly it is not yet finished. As it goes on, perhaps we should keep in mind the comments of Donald Laird, who wrote: "To avoid deadly seriousness and bitterness, it might be well to remind ourselves of the undergraduate who interpreted the initials ESP to mean 'error some place.'" Skepticism is still in order, as is, on both sides of the argument, the most rigorous effort to exclude both intentional and unintentional error.—D. W.