



the FEAR of Psi



Its the Thought that Counts

By *Stephen E. Braude, Ph.D*

My first experience of apparently large-scale psychokinesis (PK) occurred a long time before I knew anything about parapsychology. The year was 1968, and I was in graduate school, working toward my Ph.D. in philosophy. I had no interest in parapsychology at the time, and to the extent I had any solid philosophical views at all, I fancied myself to be a kind of hard-nosed materialist. That wasn't because of any careful, sustained thought I had given to the subject (although of course I knew some of the relevant literature). It was mostly just a bit of semi-critical intellectual posturing, something which I felt suited the person I believed I ought to be.

At any rate, it was a slow afternoon in Northampton, Massachusetts (as most afternoons in Northampton were apt to

be), and two close friends stopped by my house, just to hang out. Since we had already seen the one movie in town and could think of nothing else to do, my friends suggested that we hold a séance (they considered it to be a game called “table-up”). They said they had done this several times before and that it was great fun. Although I was somewhat underwhelmed at the proposal and suspicious of their prediction that the table would move without normal assistance, I went along with it and accepted my friends as instructors in the game of “table up.” We used a small folding table that I owned and placed our fingers lightly upon its surface, concentrating silently on the command (and sometimes muttering softly), “table-up!” To my astonishment, for the next three hours the table tilted and nodded in response to questions, spelling out answers according to a naively cumbersome code my friends had recommended (nodding once for the letter ‘A’, twice for ‘B’, and so on). We ostensibly contacted three different entities, only one of which provided information it seemed possible to check out. That communicator claimed to be someone named Horace T. Jecum (the spelling may well have been botched in the process of implementing our awkward code), and he claimed to have built the house where I was living (a classic and quite old New England-style home, built some time toward the end of the eighteenth century). Compared to the assertions made by the earlier ‘communicators’ (especially the one claiming implausibly to be the River Styx), I figured that this apparent piece of information should be easy enough to confirm; all I had to do was to check the records at City Hall. Unfortunately, it turned out that my house was so old that it antedated the city records. So I never found out who built the house, much less whether the person’s name was anything like that of Horace T. Jecum.

Of course, quite apart from the information allegedly conveyed by means of table tilting, there remained the peculiar fact *that* the table tilted for three hours. I doubt that I could describe the event so as to quell all skeptical concerns. However, I will say that I’m

personally convinced that my friends were not pulling a trick on me. It was daylight; we were not under the influence either of legal or illicit substances; I knew my friends well, and they were not given to practical jokes; the phenomena occurred for a long time, allowing ample opportunity for inspection; I’m convinced that nothing but our fingers touched the table (and that they rested lightly on its surface); and finally, even when one of my friends left the table to go to another room, the table continued to tilt and spell out answers to questions, rising under the fingers of the two remaining sitters. And it did that even when we were standing beside the table, quite obviously not lifting it with our knees.

I was so impressed by the phenomena that I resolved to deal with it philosophically as soon as I had taken care of some grubby practical concerns, such as receiving my Ph.D., landing a job, and then getting tenure. Because I knew that my mentors and colleagues would, for the most part, adopt a supercilious and condescending attitude toward an interest in psychic stuff, I simply put the whole matter on the back burner for about eight years – actually, putting it out of mind – until (as a tenured professor) I had the academic freedom to pursue whatever philosophical research I wanted.¹

AN UNKNOWN FEAR

Now, although the physical phenomenon of table tilting is undoubtedly interesting, what intrigues just as much about that episode in my life is my immediate visceral reaction to what I observed. Not only did I experience alternating blasts of skepticism, puzzlement, and curiosity, but the phenomena scared the hell out of me. But why should I have felt such an intense fear? I didn’t understand my reaction at the time (although, characteristically, I was at no loss for inadequate hypotheses). Now, however, I think I might have a clue as to what was going on, and if I’m right, it helps

explain why both the evidence for and the literature about PK have certain outstanding peculiar features.

It's tempting to account for my reaction by appealing simply to the fear of the unknown. But that won't get us very far. There are lots of unknown things which don't scare us at all. So what was it, *specifically*, that frightened me? Of course, on the surface at least, it appeared that something other than the three people in the room caused the table to move. So perhaps I was afraid of the possibility of discarnate agency. But why should that have been frightening? Granted, I might have recognized that the table movements were *ostensibly* produced by a discarnate agent, but that doesn't mean I took that option seriously. Although I'm hardly certain of this, I may well have been too blindly and thoroughly entrenched in my few philosophical conceits for the possibility of discarnate influence ever to have been a live option in my mind, even unconsciously. In any case (and more importantly), since that time there have been other contexts in which I've genuinely suspended my customary philosophical prejudices and allowed myself to entertain seriously the possibility that discarnate surviving personalities were influencing events around me. For example, I did that often during the several years I spent getting to know the healer Olga Worrall. But at no time did I ever experience fear in connection with the phenomena I observed.

I recognize, of course, that the very possibility of postmortem agency raises the spectre of hostility and revenge from beyond the grave, just as a matter of principle. If we can influence the world at all after our bodily death, clearly that influence can be either positive or negative. Nevertheless, my guess is that the potential threat of discarnate influence is simply not as deeply intimidating as another possibility: namely, that one or more of those present in the room psychokinetically – and unconsciously – caused the table to move. Although I'm sure I didn't clearly grasp this point at the time (that is, in the informed way I now recognize it, after many years of thinking

about the issues and their implications), I'm also certain that I wasn't entirely oblivious to it. After all, I may not have given any serious thought in those days to parapsychology, but it's not as though I was totally ignorant of the *concept* of psychokinesis.

Still, why should *that* have been frightening? What's so scary about PK among the living? In some of my other works and elsewhere in the literature, interested readers can find more or less elaborate answers to that question.² For now, however, an abbreviated tease will have to do. The crucial point, I think, is this. It takes almost no conceptual leap to connect the possibility of innocuous psychokinetic object movements with other, far more unsettling, applications of PK. Whether we acknowledge it consciously or not, if we can make a pencil, cigarette, or table move – not to mention heal a person – by means of PK, then in principle we ought to be able to do such things as cause auto accidents, heart attacks, or merely annoying pains and tickles in another person. For one thing (and for reasons Jule Eisenbud and I have considered elsewhere), given the current (and considerable) state of our ignorance concerning psychic functioning, we are simply in no position to suppose that occurrences of psi must always be of small or moderate scale. In fact, we have no idea at all just how refined or large-scale psi might be. But quite apart from that issue, there is no reason to think that car or airplane crashes, heart attacks, and so forth, require more (or more refined) PK than that required for small object movements. After all, events of small magnitude can have extensive consequences; so a car crash (say) could be caused, in principle, by a well-placed small-scale psychic nudge. Thus, there seems no escaping the conclusion that if PK can be triggered by unconscious intentions, then we might be responsible for a range of events (in particular, accidents and other calamities) for which



most of us would prefer merely to be innocent bystanders. Moreover, we would all be potential victims of psychically triggered events (intentional or otherwise) whose sources we could not conclusively identify and whose limitations we could not assess.

More generally, what is so unnerving about this is that we must entertain seriously a world view which most of us associate, usually condescendingly, only with so-called primitive societies. It's a magical picture of reality according to which people can interfere with each others' lives in all sorts of ways we would prefer to be impossible. Of course, some of these interactions might be beneficial; but what scares us, I believe, is the spectre of psychic snooping, telepathic influence, and potent malevolent uses of PK (e.g., the "evil eye" and hexing). Granted, there are places in the world where beliefs of this sort are quite common and are treated as a matter of course. But this picture of reality doesn't go down very well in most industrialized societies. In fact, over several decades of public lectures I've had many opportunities to see how much distress I unleash when I simply raise the issue to my audiences. Significantly, that reaction has been especially intense at various New Age conventions where attendees focus exclusively on the potential benefits of psychic influence, apparently refusing to acknowledge that no power can be used exclusively for the good (I must confess, I've found it mischievously satisfying to play the role of the voice of evil on those occasions).

Most (or at least many) parapsychologists nowadays will concede that the fear of psi is prevalent both in and outside parapsychology. In fact, parapsychologists might betray it in quite subtle ways. As Eisenbud has persuasively argued, one way laboratory researchers in the field exhibit that fear is by means of seemingly innocent or careless mistakes, oversights, and omissions which undermine an experiment.³ Eisenbud viewed these missteps as analogous to apparently innocent slips of the tongue, bits of behavior that reveal thoughts and feelings of which the speaker may be consciously

unaware. But perhaps an even more interesting manifestation of the fear of psi is a widespread kind of "methodological piety," in which researchers exhibit "endless pseudo-scientific fussiness and obsessional piddling, which, as often as not, results in never getting anything done unless under conditions that virtually strangulate the emergence of anything faintly resembling a psi occurrence."⁴ To put it another way, some researchers manage to make experiments so complicated and artificial that they snuff out all manifestations of psi except, apparently, enough to be significant at the .05 level (that is, only marginally significant according to the standard prevailing in the behavioral sciences). That's still sufficient to merit publishing a paper, and it helps the researcher to feel successful and to justify his or her work within the field generally. But it's not enough to seriously challenge a possibly deeper wish that psi simply doesn't occur.

FIGHT THE POWER

But what is arguably even more interesting is the way the fear of psi seems to have shaped the course of parapsychology around the turn of the twentieth century. Skeptics often like to sneer that dramatic paranormal physical phenomena, such as full table levitations and materializations, seem to have disappeared from the parapsychological scene. The main reason, they often charge, is that modern technology has simply made it too difficult to get away with the fraud that was more easily perpetrated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But even though that position is often promulgated as an obvious piece of received wisdom, it is (to put it bluntly) clearly defective – if not simply foolish. Often, it demonstrates such a grossly superficial command of the data and issues that one can only wonder why proponents of this view would risk embarrassment by flaunting their ignorance in print.

Without going into the whole matter here,⁵ we should note, first, that the skeptic's appeal to modern technology is a double-edged sword. Turn-of-the-century technological primitiveness affected not only the means for detecting fraud, but also the means for producing it. (Similarly, today's advanced technology has made possible a range of both fraudulent practices and snooping devices that could not have been employed during the heyday of spiritualism.) Just as there were no small electrical devices (such as miniature video cameras) in the late 1800s capable of catching fraudulent mediums in the act, there were also no similar devices capable of producing the large-scale phenomena under controlled conditions for which we have good evidence. Forget about those phenomena explainable, in principle, by means of sleight of hand and diversion techniques. Skeptics often like to focus on those cases, but they're relatively unimportant, if not totally irrelevant to a proper assessment of the evidence for observable PK. What really matters is that there is a substantial residue of phenomena produced under conditions in which no accomplice or device could have been concealed, some of which even today's technology can't produce (e.g., D.D. Home's materialized hands).

One of my favorite examples concerns D.D. Home's accordion phenomena. Many observers reported that Home was able to make accordions play untouched, or when held at the end away from the keys. In fact, sometimes the accordions were said to play melodies on request. Now, Home preferred to have the accordion do its thing under the séance table, because he said the "power" was strongest there. Obviously, that could be cause for suspicion; but to a more generous or open-minded investigator it might simply indicate Home's own idiosyncratic beliefs about the workings of psi. The renowned scientist William Crookes fell into that latter category, although he also realized why others might – quite reasonably – be concerned about phenomena which the medium preferred to produce under the table. So instead of taking a glibly

dismissive attitude toward Home's avowed beliefs, Crookes devised a way to test Home's accordion phenomena while still honoring the medium's preferences.

First, Crookes bought a new accordion for the occasion; hence it was not Home's own instrument, nor one he had an opportunity to tamper with beforehand. Second, Crookes picked Home up at his apartment and watched him change clothes. That allowed him to determine that Home wasn't concealing a device capable of producing the phenomena (although in the early 1870's, it is unclear what such a device could have been). Crookes then took Home to his house, where he had built a special cage for the accordion. The cage fit under Crookes' dining room table, and there was only enough space above it for Home to reach in and hold the accordion at the end away from the keys. There was not enough room for Home to reach down further and manipulate the instrument and its keyboard. Observers were stationed on both sides of Home, and another went under the table with a lamp in order to observe the accordion. Under those and slightly revised conditions (such as running an electrical current through the cage and Home removing his hand from the accordion, placing both hands on the table), the accordion was reported to have expanded and contracted, played simple melodies, and floated about inside the cage.⁶



Daniel Dunglas Home

I consider this to be an interesting and especially important piece of evidence. Nevertheless, the fact remains (as the skeptic likes to note), we don't see such things any more. But if we can't explain that fact by appealing to the advent of modern technology (or to a greater degree of gullibility around the turn of the century), what sense can we make of it? I want to suggest that the fear of psi has probably played a major role.

To see this, we should note first that the dramatic PK occurring around the turn of the century took place within the context of the spiritualist movement, which was enormously popular at the time, and which gave rise to the widespread practice of holding séances around a table for the purpose of contacting deceased friends and relatives. Furthermore, the great mediums of that era were all sincere spiritists. That is, they believed that they were merely facilitating phenomena produced by discarnate spirits; they did not believe they actually produced the phenomena themselves. But that means that those individuals were off the hook psychologically no matter what happened. So if nothing (or only boring phenomena) occurred, the medium could always attribute the failures to an inept communicator or a “bad connection” between this world and the spirit world. More importantly, however, when impressive phenomena occurred, mediums didn’t have to fear the extent of their own powers. They didn’t have to worry about what they might produce (consciously or unconsciously) outside the safe confines of the séance room.

As time went on, more and more people – both in and out of the field of psychical research – took seriously the possibility that physical mediums might be PK agents and therefore the actual cause of phenomena attributed by others to surviving spirits. And even when the mediums and other spiritists resisted this belief, the fact remains that the belief was increasingly “in the air” and difficult to ignore, as increasing numbers of secular researchers began to investigate the phenomena for themselves. But I think this can only have had a chilling effect on the psychology of mediumship generally. Mediums knew that even sympathetic investigators considered them to be causes of – and not simply vessels for – paranormal physical phenomena. So they now had a concern which quite possibly had never entered their minds before – namely, that they might have powers they could not control and which conceivably could do great harm. It is not surprising, then, to find that Eusapia Palladino’s impressive phenomena in the 1890s

and first decade of the twentieth century were less impressive than those of Home twenty years earlier.⁷ And it’s even less surprising to find that the mediumistic ‘superstars’ in the next several decades of the twentieth century had increasingly less intimidating repertoires of phenomena. In fact, by the time we come to Rudi Schneider in the 1920s and 30s, the most sensational phenomena tended merely to be medium-sized object movements. And more recently, alleged PK superstars such as Nina Kulagina and Felicia Parise produced even smaller-scale phenomena.⁸

Moreover, it is interesting to note how PK superstars in the latter half of the twentieth century seemed to *suffer* greatly when producing their phenomena. Their spiritistic predecessors typically went into a trance or at least into a state of passive receptivity, and occasionally they were tired afterwards. But more modern PK stars have seen themselves as the locus of their phenomena, and they seem quite clearly to be making a conscious effort to achieve their results. But of course, since they acknowledge their own role in the production of the phenomena, it is not surprising that they should have to work so hard (say) to make a cigarette or pill bottle move a millimeter or an inch. In fact, consider how convenient that is psychologically – that is, from the psychic’s point of view. If PK subjects feel it’s necessary to expend a great deal of energy to produce only a small effect, then (in a careless line of thought characteristic of much self-deception) it can easily seem to them as if their life or health would be endangered by trying to produce a phenomenon worth worrying about.

THE SKEPTICS’ NIGHTMARE

I can’t let the topic of the fear of psi drop without noting another of its apparent and (to me at least) striking manifestations, one that’s as common today as it was during the heyday of spiritualism. It continues to amaze me how carelessly and unscrupulously

otherwise smart and honest people argue against the existence of psi generally – and its more dramatic manifestations in particular. There are, of course, careful, courageous, and reflective critics of the field. But too often critics resort easily to lines of argument they would be quick to detect as sleazy or indefensible in other contexts – for example, if those arguments had been directed at *them*. In fact, it's almost as if a veil of idiocy suddenly descends on those who are otherwise penetrating and intelligent. In my view, it's unlikely that in most other contexts skeptics would resort so easily to *ad hominem* and straw man arguments. But that's precisely what dominates the skeptical literature. In the case of *ad hominem* arguments, we find Trevor Hall spending a considerable portion of his small book on D.D. Home trying to establish the medium's vanity (relying in part on testimony from someone whose lies about Home have been well-established), and worrying about whether Home had an affair with one of his benefactors. Similarly, we find Ruth Brandon speculating on the possibility that Home might have been homosexual.⁹ And as for straw man arguments (that is, generalizing from the weakest cases), quite often one finds skeptics arguing, say, that the case of Home should be ignored because the medium's small-scale phenomena might be mimicked by sleight of hand, or because the most poorly-documented bits of evidence (such as Home's alleged levitation out the window at Ashley House) are weak.¹⁰ Now are we supposed to believe that, all of a sudden, these critics don't understand that the most carefully documented pieces of evidence, and the phenomena most difficult to explain away, are the ones that count? In the case of Home, what really matters is that Home often produced large-scale phenomena, on the spur of the moment, in locations never before visited, with objects supplied by sitters, in good light, and with ample opportunity to observe the phenomena closely while they were in progress. It's also important to note that Home did this for nearly twenty-five years without once being detected in trickery.

It's obvious that many skeptics are intelligent people, and I suggest that it's highly unlikely that these shabby criticisms of the parapsychological evidence are simply the sorts of occasional and more or less random spasms of stupidity that all persons experience sometimes. Indeed, if that's all the criticisms were, then presumably those lapses wouldn't occur so exclusively and so transparently in connection with parapsychology. It's much more plausible that many skeptics are simply in a kind of conceptual panic, that in the grip of this panic their reason and integrity go by the wayside, and that their fear of psi is little different from what I felt back in 1968.

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