

## Parapsychological Association Presidential Address, 2018<sup>1</sup>

Dean Radin

Institute of Noetic Sciences

**Abstract:** In this address, first I discuss with the benefit of historical hindsight why it would have made more sense to call our organization the Psychophysics Association rather than the Parapsychological Association, and then I explore the intimate relations between the esoteric traditions, psi, and magic.

*Keywords:* magic, esoteric traditions, psychophysics

In my presentation today, I will first discuss why I would like to replace the term “parapsychology,” then I will discuss psi, magic, and the esoteric traditions as a strategy for uncovering clues that might inform an explanatory model of psi.

To begin, the good news is that as far as the health of the Parapsychological Association goes, our membership in 2018 is approaching 400, which is higher than it has ever been. This suggests that we are in the midst of a favorable Zeitgeist that is becoming more tolerant about psi research. How can we take advantage of this movement to achieve a membership of 4,000? One way to answer that question is by addressing the elephant in the room. The elephant is the word “parapsychology.” This word was coined in 1889 by the German philosopher and psychologist Max Dessoir, who defined it as “the power or means of going beyond or besides the ordinary. One could call the phenomena that step outside the usual process of the inner life as psychical and the science dealing with them parapsychology” (Bringmann, Luck, Miller, & Early, 1997, p.71). That seems reasonable enough, but Dessoir then adds, “The word is not nice. In my opinion it has the advantage to denote a hitherto unknown fringe area between the average and the pathological states.” In other words, the person who coined the name of our organization had already anticipated that it was less than desirable because it immediately suggests that psi experiences are both rare and on the edge of pathology. We know from many surveys that this stereotype is not only unhelpful, it is also not true. Psi experiences are frequently reported by perfectly healthy people, including scientists (Wahbeh, Radin, Mossbridge, Vieten, & Delorme, 2018). But the trouble with the term is also reflected in the many dictionary definitions of the prefix “para” which means beside or next to, like parabola or parallel. It also means protection, like parachute or parasol. It means subsidiary to roles with higher status, like a paramedic or paralegal. It means beyond ordinary logic, like a paradox. And it means abnormal or defective, like paranoia and paranormal. These definitions start out relatively

---

<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to: Dean Radin, Ph. D., Institute of Noetic Sciences, 101 San Antonio Road, Petaluma, CA, 94952, USA, [dradin@noetic.org](mailto:dradin@noetic.org)

dispassionate. Who doesn't like a parasol? But then they get progressively darker by referring to subsidiary abnormalities.

If you go to Google and search for images associated with parapsychology, what you immediately find is the fraudulent phone psychic, Miss Cleo. You see images of Ouija boards, the movie *Ghostbusters*, and books with exciting titles like, "Quantum parapsychology: How science is proving the paranormal" (Jacobs & Soderlund, 2017). These are all at the top of Google's images, which mirror popular beliefs and expectations. If you then go to websites that have slideshows on parapsychology that students created for their classes, most of them repeat old prejudices, like psi is "incompatible with well-established laws of science."

How do we fix this problem? One way that the field has attempted to distinguish parapsychology from the great unwashed paranormal is through the use of euphemisms. Our jargon includes terms like psi, remote viewing, engineering anomalies, transpersonal psychology, anomalous cognition, predictive physiological anticipation, and so on. Such terms can be useful short-term deflections, but they do not get around the fact that, however we define it, parapsychology is about the bridge between mind and matter. And there are no mainstream academic disciplines where this topic is a natural fit. As a result, with few exceptions in the academic world, parapsychology is forced out into the cold (Broderick, 2007). The closest we have to a discipline of mind-matter interaction is captured in the word "psychophysics," which was coined by German physicist Gustav Fechner (1801–1887). Today, the discipline of psychophysics is primarily concerned with the biophysics of sensory systems. But that is not how it began.

Fechner coined the term psychophysics as a result of a mystical vision. His experience, in alignment with that of many mystics, revealed to him that the usual dualistic way of perceiving and thinking about the world is an illusion. Psychophysics was Fechner's attempt to describe and scientifically pursue the truth of that vision, but personal mystical experiences are difficult to convey to others, so the discipline devolved into conventional mathematical ways of modeling the ordinary senses (Fechner, 1860).

However, in his book, *The Little Book of Life After Death*, we find Fechner explicitly writing about psi: "In rare cases, we see the light of consciousness wander out of the narrower body into the wider and return again, bringing news of what happens in distant spaces, in distant time... To the subjective vision there comes a flash so unusually vivid as to bring to the earthly sense an impression rising above the threshold from an otherwise inaccessible distance. Here begin the wonders of clairvoyance, of presentiments, and premonitions in dreams" (Fechner, 1907/2014, p. 95-96). Fechner's metaphysical writings significantly influenced William James's interests in studying what he called the "wild facts" of human experience (Baum, 1935; Murphy, 1949). So psychophysics is much closer to parapsychology than many who work in that field may realize (Hawkins, 2011).

This suggests that the Parapsychological Association might have been called the Psychophysics Association. Well, it is too late for that now, but you may appreciate why I am raising this issue. At one time, parapsychology was a useful neologism. Today it has become a weight that keeps us anchored far off-shore. Academics who have a deep personal interest in the field are well aware of the negative connotations of the term, so they cannot afford to become members of the Parapsychological Association. It is too dangerous for their career. I have heard this complaint expressed to me by at least a dozen

academics who would gladly become members of the Psychophysics Association, but not the Parapsychological Association. There is no easy answer to this problem, and perhaps if we wait long enough parapsychology will outlast the naysayers and become a respectable name. But until then, I do think it is useful to keep it in mind as a nagging problem in search of a solution.

Now let us turn to something less troublesome. Last week (summer of 2018), I spoke at an international science conference in Darmstadt, Germany, called *Curious 2018*. It was sponsored by the pharmaceutical company Merck KGaA, which manufactures pharmaceutical drugs, healthcare products, and precision materials. The conference was advertised as having 35 of the world's most distinguished scientists and entrepreneurs as speakers, including five Nobel Prize winners, Craig Venter (of human genome fame), an address by the CEO of Microsoft, and a congratulatory address by the German minister of science.<sup>2</sup>

I was delighted to be invited as one of the speakers, but also surprised because I hardly know anything about pharmaceuticals, development of healthcare products, or precision materials. I asked the conference organizer what he had in mind for my talk. His reply: Science, psi, and magic. He had read my book *Real Magic* (Radin, 2018), and thought the topic would be perfect to stimulate creative ideas for this conference.

I began my talk by explaining to the audience why I was talking about magic at a scientific conference. I showed a slide with the company logos of Blockbuster, Kodak, Polaroid, RadioShack, and Tower Records. I pointed out that all of these once highly successful companies went bankrupt because they made the same mistake – they failed to innovate. They were too successful at what they were doing, but failed to anticipate change and became stuck in their ways. This lesson was particularly relevant to Merck because the conference was being held in celebration of their 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. No company (indeed no entity of any sort) can survive for 350 years without being resilient and open-minded in the face of change. Merck thrived because its corporate culture was forced to take innovation very seriously, even to the point of embracing exotic concepts like magic (at least, when there is supporting scientific evidence).

I explained that when one is genuinely interested in innovation, anomalies move from the fringe to center court. This is because observations that question the status quo, especially the scientific status quo, might well anticipate the next big breakthrough. My interest in anomalies tends to revolve around human experience. One such example is genius. We know that there are rare Mozarts among us, but we have only the vaguest notions how to explain that level of prodigious talent (Simonton, 2016). Then there is acquired savant syndrome, which is when a normal person gets hit in the head, and tomorrow without prior training they miraculously become a concert pianist (Treffert, 2014). Even stranger, there is sudden savant syndrome, which is where you are perfectly fine, you go to sleep, and then you wake up and you are a concert pianist (Treffert, 2018). There are individuals with dissociative identity disorder, where one personality is sighted and another is blind (Waldvogel, Ullrich, & Strasburger, 2007). The full taxonomy of human anomalies goes on and on (Kelly & Kelly, 2009). These phenomena are very important because they suggest that our understanding of human potential is still in its infancy.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://curious2018.com/>

My professional interest in these anomalies has focused on psychic phenomena, because now we are dealing with anomalies that can be studied under laboratory conditions. Rather than relying on spontaneous events or extremely rare people, we can study ordinary people performing simple tasks. I believe that makes our topic of study far more tractable than trying to figure out what made Leonardo da Vinci tick.

With that as a setup for my talk, I then explained that the magic I was interested in was not like “magic whitening toothpaste” or “baby magic shampoo.” Those meanings of magic are expressions of awe or wonder. Nor did I mean fictional magic like Harry Potter, or fake magic like Harry Houdini. Instead, I was interested in esoteric practices strongly suggestive of psi and at the same time intimately linked with the scientific enterprise.

One of the first modern books to discuss magic in the context of parapsychology was *Where Science and Magic Meet* (Roney-Dougal, 2010). Other recent references to the psi-magic connection can be found in anthropology (Hunter & Luke, 2014). However, the psi-magic connection does not show up in the index of the largest recent compendium of parapsychological research, *Parapsychology: A Handbook for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cardeña, Palmer, & Marcusson-Clavertz, 2015). This suggests a certain professional embarrassment among parapsychologists who would rather not attract attention to the fact that psi and magic are closely related.

By magic, I specifically mean three age-old esoteric practices: *divination* (perception through time or space), *force of will* (intentional mental influence of the physical world), and *theurgy* (communicating with spirits). Defining magical practices in this way, and dropping the occult ceremonial gloss associated with esoteric magic, clearly reveals that magic is exactly what parapsychology studies.

The scholarly study of magic begins with explorations of shamanism, but we do not need to go that far back in history to appreciate the strong relations between science, magic, and psi. We see it in Francis Bacon, the father of scientific empiricism, who wrote about how to test for telepathy and psychokinesis. We see it in Isaac Newton, who wrote far more about alchemy than physics (partially because there was no distinction between alchemy and chemistry in his day; Principe, 2013). We see it in Galileo, who cast horoscopes (because, as with alchemy, there was little distinction between astronomy and alchemy in his day), or in Robert Boyle, who wrote about clairvoyance. In other words, when you go back to the very origins of science, you find that many of the founders were interested in the same topics we are interested in – the bridge between magic, science, and psi (Thorndike, 1958).

Magic and psi were not just the interests of medieval scientists. We see the same interests in Nobel Laureates J.J. Thomson, Marie Curie, and Charles Richet, pioneer electrochemist William Crookes, and of course, in psychologist William James. All were interested in spiritualism, attended séances, and some of them conducted their own experiments. Closer to the present day we find individuals like J. Edgar Coover, who developed methods that presaged the gold-standard double-blind clinical trial in his studies of ESP at Stanford University in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Coover, 1917); Hans Berger, the German psychiatrist who developed the EEG in an attempt to measure the “psychic energy” he felt was responsible for an episode of telepathy between him and his sister (Millett, 2001); Gustav Fechner, as we have already discussed; and J. B. Rhine, father of modern parapsychology, who among other things helped pioneer the first meta-analysis of ESP card tests. These and many more forgotten connections

between science, magic and psi can be found in Andrea Sommers's informative website, *ForbiddenHistories.com*.

After I motivated the historical connections between magic, science, and psi, the next question I addressed is whether there is any evidence supporting magic/psi. Most people who are not familiar with the relevant literature get their information from Google, which places Wikipedia on the top of the search list, which is in turn the worst possible place to learn about controversial topics<sup>3</sup>. So in my talk for the Merck conference I felt it necessary to give a fast overview of the empirical state of the art. Fortunately, because of the growing number of meta-analyses, it is now straightforward to provide a summary meta-meta-analysis of the psi data. Perhaps the most impressive such analysis available today is Etzel Cardeña's outstanding article published in *American Psychologist*, the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association (Cardeña, 2018). The article reviewed over a dozen classes of psi experiments, involving roughly ten thousand participants overall, and reported by about four dozen labs around the world. The perceptual-psi studies provided extremely high degrees of confidence that telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition are repeatable effects observed under well-controlled conditions. For mind-matter interaction phenomena the evidence was not quite as strong, but also well above chance.

Because the empirical database is so strong, I now have an easy way to respond to skeptics who argue that there is no scientific evidence for psi. I ask them, rhetorically, what discipline is the best arbiter of the proper interpretation of data? The answer, when we think about it for a while, is statistics. Then I show them what Jessica Utts said about psi as part of her 2016 presidential address to the American Statistical Association (Utts, 2016): "The data in support of precognition and possibly other related phenomena are quite strong statistically, and would be widely accepted if they pertained to something more mundane" (p. 1379).

Now here is why we should be interested in magic: The scientific data argues that magical practices tap into essentially the same phenomena that we call psi, and that implies that some aspects of ancient esoteric principles might not be fairy tales. After all, just like today's technologies are applications of the scientific worldview, ancient magical practices were applications of the esoteric worldview. Understanding that worldview better might offer important clues about how magic and, by association, psi works.

Many of us have been musing with leading edge ideas in physics as a way to understand psi. Such proto-theories are deeply embedded within the scientific worldview, partially because that is the worldview adopted by most parapsychologists today by virtue of our being trained in traditional scientific ways. But it is also because if one seeks mainstream acceptance, or even just acknowledgement, we are required to speak the language of science. Unfortunately, so far these models have not been very useful in advancing our ability to reliably demonstrate psi effects to any disinterested observer, nor has the academic mainstream found these theories to be particularly persuasive. Perhaps future theoretical work will bear fruit, perhaps not.

So I decided to look more closely at the esoteric worldview for clues that might help inform new theories. Starting with shamanism, we progress (in the Western tradition) from Pythagoras, to Plato,

---

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia admits this in an article that paradoxically questions its own reliability: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia\\_is\\_not\\_a\\_reliable\\_source](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedia_is_not_a_reliable_source)

Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, the Kabbalah, the Knights Templar, the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, Theosophy, Christian Science, and so on. Following this historical trail, one sees a clear lineage of esoteric breadcrumbs, from ancient times to the present day. Today, esoterica is most easily seen in the book genre on affirmations and positive thinking, and in comic book-inspired movies and television shows.

This theme, which runs through both Western and Eastern esoteric traditions, is that *consciousness is fundamental*. A synthesis of these traditions, dubbed the “perennial philosophy” (Huxley, 1945), asserts that there is some sort of primordial awareness, or universal Consciousness, that is prior to the physical world and permeates all space and time. Our personal awareness is also said to be composed of this Consciousness “substance.” Precisely how awareness turns into the physical world is unknown, but leading-edge ideas in physics and mathematics, and proposed by mainstream scientific thought-leaders are beginning to tackle this problem. The terms used today are no longer based on esoteric metaphysics, but rather on ideas about information and mathematics (Davies, 2014; Tegmark, 2014; Vedral, 2012).

An interesting facet about this trend is that within the esoteric worldview the “law of correspondence” does not make a strong distinction between physical reality and abstract symbolic representations of reality. Indeed, this law is the basis of most magical spells. But there is a very close parallel within the rising informational worldview because information and mathematics are also abstract, symbolic languages. The similarity between ancient and modern ways of imagining the nature of reality is not often discussed by scientists who are exploring informational models of reality. But the connection is clear.

What this suggests is that today’s knowledge hierarchy, starting with physics and ending with psychology, might benefit by adding a new layer of fundamental assumptions below physics. For want of a better term, we could call this layer Consciousness. This approach is neither philosophical idealism nor materialism, but an integration of both. It maintains existing scientific disciplines exactly as we know them today, so there is no need to throw away the textbooks. But it also means that just as physical forces permeate all of the upper levels of a purely materialistic hierarchy (e.g., the weak and strong nuclear forces are still part of chemistry and biology), now Consciousness permeates all levels above it as well.

This provides an alternative way of thinking about psi and magic from a scientific perspective, because within this view our awareness is essentially the same as universal Consciousness (albeit tightly constrained by physical embodiment), and as such it is not bound by the usual notions of space and time. That is, we can perceive anywhere in space or time not through exchange of conventional fields or forces, and not by transmitting signals, but rather because at a deeper layer of reality our awareness is already everywhere and everywhen, outside of space and time. In addition, the same consciousness “source” from which the physical universe arises is already part of us, so to a limited extent we have the capacity to influence the physical world. This esoterically-augmented scientific worldview suggests that everything is ultimately made of Consciousness, but this does not mean that everything is self-aware, at least not as aware as the average human. Perhaps a certain degree of physical complexity is required to gain self-reflective awareness. If that is so, then complex objects like the sun might be self-aware. In fact, any sufficiently complex system, especially those with inherent forms of recursion, might also gain self-awareness. This is relevant to understanding theurgy, because now the notion of disembodied “spirits” is thinkable rather than unthinkable. That is, a localized, non-physical, bundle of energy, like ball-lightning or a “ghost,” might be self-aware.

In closing, I want to emphasize that I am not advocating that we need to drop today's scientific worldview to advance our understanding of psi. This is not about a regression to the past. That would not make sense because scientific materialism has been far too successful in describing a vast swatch of the observable universe. But I am proposing that today's scientific worldview needs to be expanded to accommodate psi, and in the process of crafting that expansion, I speculate that we will run headlong into esoteric concepts that lead directly to magical practices. I have proposed just one way to do this by paying attention to clues offered by the esoteric traditions. I hope to stimulate others to make equally wild proposals.

## References

- Baum, M. (1935). William James and psychical research. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 30, 111-118.
- Bringmann, W. G., Luck, H. E., Miller, R., & Early, C. E. (Eds.). (1997). *A pictorial history of psychology* (1<sup>st</sup> edition). Chicago, IL: Quintessence.
- Broderick, D. (2007). *Outside the gates of science: Why it's time for the paranormal to come in from the cold*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
- Cardeña, E., Palmer, J., & Marcusson-Clavertz, D. (Eds.) (2015). *Parapsychology: A handbook for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Cardeña, E. (2018). The experimental evidence for parapsychological phenomena: A review. *American Psychologist*, 73, 663–677. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000236>
- Coover, J. E. (1917). *Experiments in psychical research at Leland Stanford Junior University*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10933-000>
- Davies, P. (2014). *Information and the nature of reality: From physics to metaphysics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fechner, G. (2014). *The little book of life after death*. Amazon Digital Services LLC. (First English translation published in 1907).
- Fechner, G. T. (1860). *Elements of psychophysics*. (H. E. Helmut, Trans.). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Hawkins, S. L. (2011). William James, Gustav Fechner, and early psychophysics. *Frontiers in Physiology*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphys.2011.00068>
- Hunter, J., & Luke, D. (Eds.). (2014). *Talking with the spirits: Ethnographies from between the worlds*. Brisbane, Australia: Daily Grail Publishing.
- Huxley, A. (1945). *The perennial philosophy*. New York: Harper Colophon Books.
- Jacobs, D., & Soderlund, S. (2017). *Quantum parapsychology: How science is proving the paranormal*. Amazon CreateSpace.
- Kelly, E., & Kelly, E. W. (2009). *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Millett, D. (2001). Hans Berger: From psychic energy to the EEG. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 44(4), 522–542.
- Murphy, G. (1949). William James and psychical research. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 43(3), 85–93.
- Radin, D. (2018). *Real magic: Ancient wisdom, modern science, and a guide to the secret power of the universe*. New York: Harmony.
- Principe, L. (2013). *The secrets of alchemy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Roney-Dougal, S. (2010). *Where science and magic meet*. Overleigh, UK: Green Magic.

- Simonton, D. K. (2016). Reverse engineering genius: Historiometric studies of superlative talent. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1377(1), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.13054>
- Tegmark, M. (2014). *Our mathematical universe: My quest for the ultimate nature of reality*. New York: Random House/Knopf.
- Thorndike, L. (1958). *A history of magic and experimental science*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Treffert, D. A. (2014). Savant syndrome: realities, myths and misconceptions. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(3), 564–571. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1906-8>
- Treffert, D. A. (2018). Brain gain: A person can instantly blossom into a savant- and no one knows why. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/brain-gain-a-person-can-instantly-blossom-into-a-savant-and-no-one-knows-why/>
- Utts, J. (2016). Appreciating statistics. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 111, 1373–1380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01621459.2016.1250592>
- Vedral, V. (2012). *Decoding reality: The universe as quantum information*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Wahbeh, H., Radin, D., Mossbridge, J., Vieten, C., & Delorme, A. (2018). Exceptional experiences reported by scientists and engineers. *EXPLORE*, 14, 329–341. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2018.05.002>
- Waldvogel, B., Ullrich, A., & Strasburger, H. (2007). Blind und sehend in einer Person: Schlussfolgerungen zur Psychoneurobiologie des Sehens [Sighted and blind in one person: a case report and conclusions on the psychoneurobiology of vision]. *Der Nervenarzt*, 78, 1303–1309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00115-007-2309-x>

### **Parapsychological Association Discours Présidentiel, 2018**

Résumé : Dans ce discours, je discuterai d'abord, en bénéficiant d'un certain recul historique, pourquoi il ferait plus de sens d'appeler notre organisation la Psychophysics Association plutôt que la Parapsychological Association, et j'explorerai ensuite les relations intimes entre les traditions ésotériques, le psi et la magie.

### **Parapsychological Association Präsidentenansprache 2018**

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Vortrag diskutiere ich zunächst, im historischen Rückblick, warum es sinnvoller gewesen wäre, unsere Gesellschaft als Psychophysics Association und nicht als Parapsychological Association zu bezeichnen und untersuche dann die engen Beziehungen zwischen den esoterischen Traditionen, Psi und Magie.

### **Discurso Presidencial de la Parapsychological Association, 2018**

Resumen: En este discurso, primero discuto, con la ventaja de la experiencia, por qué tendría más sentido llamar a nuestra organización la Asociación de Psicofísica que la Asociación de Parapsicología (Parapsychological Association). Luego exploro las relaciones cercanas entre las tradiciones esotéricas, psi, y magia.