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The Experiment Should Fit the Hypothesis

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# The Experiment Should Fit the Hypothesis

J. B. Rhine

The trouble with Price's experiment is that it is based on an unwarranted assumption about ESP. He says in effect that if ESP really operated in the researches reported, it ought to register its effect dependably in his proposed test. He assumes that such a result would *have* to follow. Therefore failure would be fatal to the hypothesis of ESP, while success would (to him at least) acceptably prove the case.

Unfortunately, ESP is not like that. No parapsychologist has ever claimed that the capacity could be made to function on demand as Price assumes. ESP is still an elusive, uncertain, capacity, one that may give high scores one day and chance scores the next; it may persist in consistently missing its target or even hitting the neighboring one. The elusiveness is attributable to the fact that the ability, although voluntary, operates very largely on an unconscious level (1).

The same mistake was made by Price in his earlier discussion of the practical application of ESP; he overlooked the fact that ESP is not a push-button effect to be turned off and on at will, as a chemistry test might be. In fact, one could easily believe science fiction has been one source of Price's conception of ESP. He has fancied a kind of repeatability and applicability that as yet simply does not exist. It is premature to expect them in such a difficult field.

As far as the mere physical conditions of the proposed test are concerned, however, I see nothing wrong in principle. The test would not involve anything essentially new. Physical barriers such as the proposed metal containers are not obstructive to the capacity. Certain psychological conditions are, of course, essential—conditions such as adequate motivation on the part of the subject who is participating, confidence in his ability to work under the conditions, and freedom from distraction. But such conditions could probably be provided, and, for some subjects at least, proper adaptation to the test conditions could probably be

managed in the course of time. If this adaptation were the only difficulty and there were adequate reasons for the test, the procedure could be accepted and used, although, of course, with the same unpredictability of results that attends all ESP tests. As it is, with a false premise concerning the nature of the ESP process, Price made his test unacceptable by giving it an implication of a finality that it could not possibly have.

Price is, in effect, dictating terms to nature rather than to the parapsychologists. Until someone claims to have exerted enough control over ESP to bring it reliably into operation on demand, such a test case or showdown as he suggests is, as I have said, fantastic. The point is that negative results would prove nothing at all. Until (if ever) ESP becomes controllable enough to warrant such a crucial test case, it would not be worth while going to all the build-up and expense that the proposed experiment would involve.

The principal aim of Price's proposed experiment is to exclude fraud. But he needs only to remember that science has, in the very nature of its procedure, protected itself against such weaknesses as that. When any revolutionary claim such as ESP is reported, the cautious scientist will naturally suspend judgment until an independent confirmation has been produced. On a very challenging issue a second or even a third supporting research is needed. The extreme skeptic may, of course, keep on suspending decision as long as he wishes. But when, as in the case of ESP, researches continue to come in, adding confirmation upon confirmation, decade after decade, from investigators in all sorts of professional and academic stations, only those who are extremely biased would cling to a theory of wholesale deception.

The spontaneous, uncontrollable nature of ESP naturally bothers us all, parapsychologists as well as skeptics. But many other erratic, fugitive effects can be found in nature, more especially in

the mental sciences, but even in biology and physics. And they are no less "natural" than the more reliable ones, for all man's inability to reproduce them at will. Control is usually just a question of further understanding of the phenomena concerned. In the case of ESP, lack of control is likely to be nothing that more and better researches will not correct.

In the meantime, scientists who openmindedly wish to satisfy themselves about ESP have two main lines of action open. The preferable way would be to ascertain the essential precautions and psychological conditions that are already known and to conduct an exploratory ESP experiment, as many others have already done. Parapsychology owes much of its evidence and most of its eminent supporters to just such exploratory investigations.

The other way is, of course, the one more generally followed in science. It begins with the critical appraisal of the research literature of the field. This literature is vastly more extensive and important than the few names given by Price indicate. Indeed, all the work reported by Soal and myself (the two "exhibits" that Price used) could be set entirely aside without seriously weakening the case for ESP or even involving the very best controlled experiments (2). During the last twenty years there have been scores of researches reported (mostly in the *Journal of Parapsychology*) that have adequately met a standard of requirements of safeguarding (even against fraud) well above that of science in general. Let anyone who is able and willing critically review the evidence for ESP to show cause, if he can, why and wherein these most qualified investigations should not be taken seriously! The *Journal of Parapsychology* will be open, as always, to the publication of such reviews.

Price has, I repeat, done parapsychology much good, as, for example, in neatly showing the fallacy of Bridgman's type of criticism. His crusading against evil-doing in ESP only serves to make his blows against its critics more effective. It even helps to unbar the portals of respected periodicals. If this is the way a research field has to be opened up to broader scientific attention here in the United States, we in parapsychology must be willing to pay the price and be grateful for the net gain.

Meanwhile, then, the scientist can determine by the usual methods how far it is safe to credit the ESP reports.

## References

1. J. B. Rhine, *J. Parapsychol.* 10, 162 (1946).
2. J. G. Pratt and J. L. Woodruff, *J. Parapsychol.* 3, 121 (1939).