

ESP: FIRST SIGHT OR SECOND SIGHT?

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Imagine this about your own mind, and about every person's mind: imagine that your consciousness is not only something that you simply somehow receive, it is also something you are actively constructing all the time, pre-consciously, using everything that is at hand: memories, sensations, general interests, and so forth. Imagine that this pre-conscious part of your mind is automatic in some ways, but that it is also very personal and unique to you, it is part of what you do, and it is always guided by your personal values and interests and goals, as well as by the realities, such as sights and sounds, that always surround you. Now think of all of this pre-conscious constructing as serving your need to anticipate the nature of reality as it is always developing around you, and understanding it in the most useful way you can imagine at every moment. Think of this as a wonderful gift from your evolutionary heritage, something that helped all of your ancestors survive long enough to procreate and raise their children, leading to the gift of your own life. This pre-conscious functioning works exquisitely well, as does a myriad other features of your being, such as the perpetual balancing of your neurochemistry, or the regulation of your heartbeat. Such are the birth-day presents from our evolution that we receive upon being born.

Please keep imagining. Imagine that each sensory experience you have, as when you notice someone enter a room, or hear a song on a radio, each of these is preceded, unconsciously, by a very brief pre-sensory experience of that thing, and that the pre-conscious part of the mind uses this information to better anticipate the experience that is about to develop. Why should we imagine this? Because of all that psychologists have learned about subliminal perception. In these experiments they artificially interrupt the development of an experience, for example by flashing some picture too rapidly to see and then remove it from sight before it can be consciously experienced. Even though the person involved never knows clearly what was flashed, these psychologists have determined that the flash has set in motion a host of anticipatory processes. We can see this by the fact that the material that was flashed can be seen more quickly a little later when it really is fully exposed. And other anticipatory effects have been found. Feelings that are appropriate for the flashed content are aroused a little bit, and can be seen later by the emotional coloring people inadvertently give to other experiences, as in their assessment of how pleasant or unpleasant something is. Many other similar effects have been found upon our thinking and our feeling and even our choices and social behaviors. There is a pre-conscious margin of experience that ordinarily passes very quickly and that we never know about (or have to be bothered with). This quick little margin is something we use very powerfully, though, just as it helped all those lovely surviving ancestors. It helped them jump away from panthers in time to escape, and duck when a tree branch was whistling toward the head. It helps you the same way all the time.

Please imagine something else. Imagine that this pre-sensory margin is itself preceded by another margin of experience that helps to guide *it as well*. This margin is potentially

quite huge in extent, both in space and time. Imagine that it typically reaches a little forward in time even before a decibel of sound has struck the ear drum or a photon has impinged upon the retina, and the mind learns a bit from this about what is to come. This early-warning stage of knowing something is extrasensory. Why should we imagine such a thing? Because of all the strange and interesting things that parapsychologists have found. Using methods as objective as those used by any scientist, they have found that sometimes people can display some knowledge of things they have never been exposed to physically at all. They can also sometimes exert some sort of influence on things, like the fall of dice, without physically touching them at all.

You may want to stop imagining about now. This idea of an extrasensory part of our minds is one of the hot points of debate in our culture. If you question this, bring up the subject at a dinner party and see what reactions ensue. However, the evidence accrued by the parapsychologists keeps politely inviting us to imagine that there is more to the mind than what comes to it by physical experience. Or, as Walt Whitman said of himself, he was not all contained between his hat and his boots.

At the Rhine Research Center, in Durham, NC, we are working on a model that I have developed for thinking about how ESP and related psi phenomena might work together with the rest of our mental functioning. This model emphasizes the idea that a psi-level of connection is involved in the development of literally all of our experience, even though this aspect is almost always entirely unconscious. Because it suggests that a psi connection comes first in experience, it is called the First Sight Model. ESP is not second-sight, as it has sometimes been called, but really first-sight.

The model is fairly complex, with many details that are not necessary to spell out for this article. To evaluate this model, I first looked at how well it accounts for many of the findings that parapsychologists have reported. I examined all the reports of studies in three areas in particular: ESP and memory, ESP and creativity, and ESP and subliminal perception. Parapsychology is a small field, but a relatively large number of studies have accumulated that examined these problems. I found that our model succeeded quite well at accounting for the patterns of findings reported – in some cases better than the researchers themselves had been able to at the time of their reports. Now our research staff is going on to carry out some new studies that will further test this model. I, with my colleagues, Christine Simmonds and Ferrell Carpenter, recently completed a study in which participants tried to capture via ESP the experience of a videotape being viewed by a Sender in another room. These participants were relaxing and describing their inner imagery while the tape was being played out of their sight and sound. A new round of studies will begin shortly in which some findings from cognitive psychology involving subliminal perception will be given an extrasensory twist. The First Sight model predicts that subliminal information and extrasensory information should combine in certain ways in forming a perception. This work is supported by a \$36,000 grant from the Bial Foundation of Portugal.

Parapsychology is associated in the popular mind with spooks and Bigfoot. Really, it is a serious, if often marginalized, academic discipline that is making serious new inroads in

our knowledge of how the mind works and how our minds fit into the physical world. To stay tuned to the latest findings from the Rhine Research Center, check out the website: www.rhine.org. This site is also a good portal to other internet sites that report parapsychological research.