

Conclusion: **Beyond Beliefs**

You know, these words, "anomalous", "supernatural", "paranormal", they propound to explain something by not explaining it. That's lazy!

John Doggett, The X-Files

The concern which prompted this thesis was the desire to understand the divide between the mainstream view that psi must be explained by fraud, and the persistent minority view which contends psi is genuine and therefore requires other types of explanation. I commenced with an examination of the mainstream philosophical arguments for psi and argued for a re-analysis in a contemporary philosophical context. The main aim of this thesis was therefore to provide a new platform for productive dialogue between the various plausible approaches to explanation of psi phenomena. Below I recap the key considerations and arguments put forward in the thesis, before making some concluding remarks.

Summary of key considerations

The critique of the mainstream arguments in philosophy regarding psi revealed problems on a number of counts: failure to recognise the structure and logic of the arguments as inferences to the best explanation (IBE); failure to consider the body of evidence in its entirety; implicit reliance on explanatory conservatism; and failure to acknowledge the role of background beliefs in coming to the fraud hypothesis judgement.

The remainder of the thesis took the form of a three-stage re-analysis of psi inspired by the IBE process: the evidence for psi was examined; a group of possible hypotheses was compiled; and finally, the process of selecting the 'loveliest' hypothesis was commenced. The psi debate had evolved into a psi hypotheses discussion. Four different approaches to explain psi were put forward. They were drawn from both the mainstream and psi-oriented literature: the Skeptic hypothesis;

two psi realist positions, which I called the Big and Small Change Natural hypotheses; and the Supernatural hypothesis.

Explanatory considerations guided the ensuing discussion. The background beliefs were discussed in relation to the history of explanation of the phenomena and it was shown that psi's explanatory history as a supernatural phenomena still impacted on its assessment today as paranormal. Arguments were made against the Supernatural hypothesis on two counts: firstly that, if legitimate, most psi phenomena are mundane in nature; and secondly, that phenomena of a more dramatic kind fall to the same criticism as the argument for theism based on religious experience.

The aim of the second part of the thesis was to allow an examination of the skeptic and psi realist hypotheses in relation to each other, informed by an updated assessment of explanatory concerns. I suggested that the Skeptic hypothesis assessment of psi was influenced by the covering law theory model of explanation, which was the 'received view' in the philosophy of science until the early 1970s. I concluded that because the covering law theory is no longer dominant, but appears to still influence the mainstream assessment of psi, it is pertinent to review psi in the context of contemporary explanation theory.

Further analysis of the three hypotheses was thus undertaken with particular focus on the problems associated with explanation of psi as an anomalous phenomena. The psi explananda were re-examined and it was found that the anomalous nature of the phenomena usually prejudiced the way the explananda were commonly represented. The explananda were therefore recast as interrogative statements with as little presumed about potential explanatory issues as possible. The competing hypotheses provided speculative answers to the questions which formed the basis for ensuing discussion undertaken in the context of contemporary explanation theory. The analysis fulfilled two functions: a place was constructed where the three hypotheses competed on equal ground; and it provided a case study to test the ways in which various explanation theories respond to explanatory issues raised by anomalous phenomena.

It was shown that the realist psi theories fall short of what is expected of acceptable explanations according to the pragmatic, causal and unificatory accounts of explanation. However, the point was made that unlike the situation that obtained

under the covering law theory, the psi realist theories were not ruled out on the basis that they were anomalous and unlawful.

The discussion also highlighted the problematic nature of explanation of anomalous phenomena, as it emerged that contemporary philosophical theories of explanation rely substantially on the body of science to provide the set of explanatory statements allowable. I suggested that as both explanation and scientific theory change over time we should be cautious not to rule out speculative theory that attempts to explain anomalous phenomena such as psi.

Concluding remarks

It has been shown during the course of this thesis that a blanket argument against the plausibility of psi based on explanation theory is unwarranted. Instead assessment of psi requires genuinely open-minded epistemic assessment of both the body of evidence for psi as well as the theories that attempt to explain the phenomena. However, due to the anomalous nature of the phenomena the process should be open to revisions as both scientific and philosophical explanation theories change and develop. The assessment of psi cannot be undertaken by a once-off argument that deals conclusively with all the evidence and theories at any one time. Updates and checks of the status of theory development and epistemic status of the evidence should be undertaken; philosophical discussion of the nature of explanation of anomalous phenomena should inform the discourse. Currently, all three hypotheses have more work to do in this regard: the skeptic hypothesis to develop accounts for how fraud, fluke or flaky methodology can really account for the phenomena; and the psi realist accounts need to develop a more plausible working theory that explains the phenomena substantially.

My assessment is that Small Change hypotheses, more particularly the quantum-theory based explanations, show the most promise. I base this on the notion that quantum theory poses more general problems to theories in science, philosophy of scientific explanation and mind theory. The area appears to be one of contemporary cross-disciplinary interest between physics, cognitive science, and philosophy and I anticipate interesting future developments in this area of inquiry that might be pertinent to quantum-based psi theories. I concede though, that this is an issue that

will have to be revisited and revised in the light of future developments. Whether or not this turns out to be the case, it is hoped that the ground has been prepared for further discussion regarding all three competing hypotheses. Developments in science, psi theory and philosophy are bound to impact on the discussion.