

Chapter 3: **Shifting sands**

The location of the shifting sands of the supernatural is thus obviously affected by the power of our explanatory systems.

Michael Scriven

The thesis now commences Stage 3 of the IBE re-analysis of psi. The task is the most complex of the three stages undertaken; the process of evaluating the competing hypotheses concerns the remainder of the thesis. During the course of discussing inference to the best explanation in Chapter 2, it was pointed out that it is important to take into consideration background beliefs when selecting one hypothesis from the list of compiled hypotheses. Therefore I commence with an examination of background beliefs that I show inform the psi hypotheses discussion, but which are rarely made explicit in the mainstream literature.

Firstly, I present what I have called the historic account. I draw on the work of David Ray Griffin and outline his argument that it is the explanatory history of psi which informs its status as paranormal in contemporary mainstream scientific and philosophical thought. I show that the explanatory history of psi as once generally accepted as supernatural informs the mainstream assessment of psi today, and therefore impacts on the psi hypotheses discussion.

Then I outline a subcategory of the Skeptic hypothesis—called hardcore skepticism—and I show that for some skeptical psi commentators, it is assumed that explanation of psi as produced by any other than fraudulent means, entails a reversion to supernatural explanatory schemes. I subsequently make a case against the Supernatural hypothesis and I use this analysis to two-fold effect: firstly, to show that the hardcore skepticism is based on a false dichotomy; and secondly, to eliminate the Supernatural hypothesis from the psi hypotheses discussion.

The remaining three hypotheses—the Big and Small Natural Change hypotheses and the Skeptic hypothesis—then become the focus of further analysis in Part II of the thesis, in which further explanatory issues are examined.

3.1 Historic account

The historic account is an assessment of the explanatory history of psi which shows that psi was once considered, by the mainstream, as supernatural. The account argues that there have been two transitions in the history of science that have informed the explanatory status of psi:

- 1) Middle Ages to the Modern world view (roughly the 14th-18th centuries)
- 2) Modern world view to the Materialist world view (roughly mid 18th and 19th centuries)

According to the scientific and religious scope of the time, the first transition placed psi-like events in the supernatural category of explanation. Currently, due to the second transition, psi is considered paranormal. The historic account maintains that it was the limits of mechanistic science that determined the scope of scientific explanation at the time the Modern world view was formed. At this time apparent psi events were considered supernatural in origin. Subsequently, with the rise of the materialist world view²⁰, the supernatural category became obsolete as an explanatory category within the framework. Therefore, under the materialist view, psi-like events are unable to be explained as supernatural, but nor can current scientific theory account for the phenomena. The historic account suggests that science is currently unable to conceive of how to account for psi because the limits of scientific explanatory scope regarding action at a distance were set during the end of the first transition, when scientific theory was influenced by mechanism.

²⁰ For the purposes of this section, in which I introduce the historic account, I understand the kind of materialism that Griffin refers to as the kind dominant in science today. More specifically, as I understand it, materialism represents the view that everything that exists is material and that what exists is best explained by reducing it to its most basic physical components. (Armstrong 1980, p65). In philosophy, however, there are opposing views that do not exclude the potential of supernatural explanation, and it is evident that for some theorists, such as deists, the supernatural category of explanation is still currently tenable. I deal with related issues regarding psi and naturalism in section 3.4.1 before discussing the Supernatural hypothesis further.

In this section I outline in more detail the argument for the historic account. I draw in the main on the work of the philosopher David Ray Griffin²¹, who is the most major proponent of the account in philosophical literature that also deals with psi specifically. I will also draw on the work of the biologists Rupert Sheldrake and John Randall in order to lend support to Griffin's analysis.

First of all I outline the two transitions which, according to Griffin, have significant impact on the explanatory assessment of psi. Then I show that Randall and Sheldrake make similar points in the course of their discussions of psi and biology. I subsequently examine further the effect that the transitions have on psi's current status as paranormal. Finally I present a chart of the historic account which ties the transitions and the explanatory history of psi together in graphic form.

3.1.1 Two transitions

Griffin presents a case that there have been two relatively recent traditions that inform the contemporary assessment of psi phenomena. The first transition started in the 14th century and was ongoing for four centuries, and the second occurred in the mid 18th century and continued through the 19th century. I will outline them each in turn.

First transition

According to Griffin from the 14th to the 17th centuries a gradual transition occurred in Western society that resulted in a situation whereby there were two explanatory categories: that of a law-abiding mechanistic physical category; and a supernatural, intangible category. Known as the mechanistic view of nature, science determined how the former operated and religious ideology the latter (Griffin 1997, p17). The change coincided with the developments in scientific understanding and the founding of the modern world view by scientists such as

²¹ David Ray Griffin is a process philosopher and theologian who has made a valuable contribution to analysing psi in relation to process philosophy. I realise that, controversially, he has recently gained some fame as a retired professor who is an advocate for 9/11 conspiracy theories. However, this thesis focuses on his early work in relation to psi phenomena, which is rigorous and thoughtful.

Isaac Newton. The view promoted the notion that God provides the mechanistic world with impetus. Griffin spells this out:

The mechanistic view of nature was also used, for example by Boyle and Newton, to argue for the existence of God: if nature was devoid of self-motion, there had to be a supernatural being to have put it into motion and also to have imposed laws of motion upon it. Newton also argued that the mechanistic materialistic conception of matter, according to which it has no hidden powers and acts only by contact, shows the need for a cosmic spiritual being to explain the mutual attraction of bodies (gravitation) and the cohesiveness of atoms in solid bodies. (Griffin 1988, p10-11)

It is not surprising that the division of explanatory categories at this time impacted on psi and placed them firmly in the supernatural category of explanation. Psi events do not appear to have any known mechanistic explanation and in the past, prior to the time the modern world view was formed, psi events were generally considered supernatural in origin²². However, subsequent developments in science and explanation impacted on this initial assessment of psi in relation to the explanatory scope of science.

Second transition

After the modern world view became dominant and explanation for psi was firmly grounded in the supernatural category, a second transition then occurred. The result changed the category in which explanation for such anomalous phenomena is sought. Griffin makes a case that from the mid-18th century and during the 19th century supernaturalism and dualism were gradually replaced by the now currently dominant materialist worldview. The materialist worldview is underpinned by the notion ‘that reality consist of nothing but a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system’ (Armstrong 1980, p65). Furthermore explanation of reality is undertaken by reduction in terms of the four known forces electromagnetism, gravity and the strong and weak nuclear forces. Therefore under the materialist view, the supernatural category of explanation is obsolete.

According to Griffin, the result of this second transition was that ‘the supernaturalistic theism of early modernism transmuted into the naturalistic atheism of late modernism. Accordingly the mechanical philosophy’s implication

²²For instance, in Chapter 2 I outlined the historic evidence for psi and mentioned the early experiment of King Croesus who tested the oracles which were thought to use supernatural means to obtain precognitive information. I also mentioned that examples of psi-like events could be found in the Bible.

that events not understandable in terms of action by contact cannot happen *naturally* came to mean that they cannot happen *at all*' (Griffin 1997, p23). In Griffin's analysis then, psi phenomena are currently difficult to explain, as they appear to resist mechanistic explanation in terms acceptable to current science, but nor can they be explained as supernatural as they have been in the past.

However, a new explanatory category has emerged which is now commonly ascribed to psi. Paranormal phenomena are considered to be 'any phenomenon which in one or more respects exceeds the limits of what is deemed physically possible on current scientific assumptions' (Thalbourne 1982, p.50). The combined effect of the two transitions thus places psi phenomena into this category because without recourse to the supernatural category of explanation and without any known explanation in science, psi is considered unexplainable.

The phenomena from spontaneous instances of psi such as in the catalogues described in the last chapter as well as biblical, historical and early Greek reports of psi-like phenomena indicate that the phenomena themselves are not new to human experience. However, if Griffin's analysis is valid, then the two major transitions are pertinent to how the phenomena are received by mainstream scientists at any particular epoch. The assessment impacts on what realm of explanation (supernatural or paranormal) is considered appropriate for psi phenomena at different times. Griffin summarises the situation that obtains for psi as follows:

The late modern worldview, with its materialism and atheism, has no room for the phenomena, period. The early modern worldview, with its dualism and supernaturalism, can allow that such phenomena do occur; indeed, it usually insists on the reality of such phenomena under the name of "miracles." (Griffin 1997, p2)

Griffin's resolution is to introduce a 'postmodern theism' with a naturalistic bent. (Griffin 1997, p3). I find Griffin's work thoughtful and provocative, but I have a different solution, which is to make a case against the supernatural theories of psi on the basis that most of the phenomena are mundane in nature. I present these arguments a little later in the chapter, as first I will outline some support for Griffin's analysis regarding psi's current status of paranormal.

3.1.2 Support for the historic account

To lend support to Griffin's claims about the history of explanation of psi, I outline similar accounts by two biologists who are also interested in the historical explanation of psi: John L. Randall; and Rupert Sheldrake.

John L. Randall's account of the mechanistic/vitalist debate

John L. Randall's account is slightly different, but it makes similar points to Griffin's about two transitions in the history of science which are relevant to the explanation of phenomena like psi. Randall traces a mechanistic/vitalist debate back to the times of Ancient Greek philosophers. He claims that Aristotelian theories of the soul were taken up by the major religions that subsequently dominated western thought on these matters (Randall 1977, p22). The effect was that 'such was the domination of thought by religion during the Middle Ages that few people stopped to ask themselves whether, in fact, the soul existed at all' (Randall 1977, p22). That is, until there was a resurgence of the mechanistic view instigated by the works of Rene Descartes. The mechanistic view consisted of a law-abiding natural, mechanistic world combined with a 'soul implanted by God' (Randall 1977, p23). As with Griffin, Randall argues that it is important to consider the ramifications of the mechanistic view on subsequent developments in science.

Randall maintains a second transition occurred. During the late 17th and much of the 18th centuries the vitalist/mechanistic debate was again a matter of contemporary concern with advocates for both sides. Gradually though, as scientific thought progressed previously vitalistic disciplines such as chemistry and biology were explained without the need to postulate the 'vital force'. The materialist view thus became dominant and 'by the end of the nineteenth century those who believed that life was more than a mere 'fortuitous concourse of atoms' were in full retreat' (Randall 1977, p26).

J. L. Randall is a biologist and the overall project in his book involves a criticism of current molecular biology which asserts that the origins of life can best be explained in reductive, mechanistic terms. He covers this ground in subsequent chapters. Obviously, his project is not the immediate concern of this thesis.

However, his account of the mechanistic/vitalist developments in science is pertinent because it gives support to the assertions made at the beginning of this section, namely, that two important transitions occurred in science which have impacted on the ontological explanatory categories of phenomena, such as psi, which are problematic to current materialist scientific orthodoxy.

Rupert Sheldrake's account of the two transitions

Rupert Sheldrake is another biologist whose research extends to parapsychology and who has written on the topic of psi. He presents another version of the historic account and, in the same vein as Randall and Griffin, presents a summary of the changes over the course of time in order to explore the ramifications of the current dominance of the mechanistic approach to explanatory problems encountered by psi. The first change occurred gradually from the time of the Middle Ages:

One way of understanding this crucial transition is in terms of a distinction, originally made in the Middle Ages, between *natura naturata* (natured nature), and *natura naturans* (naturing nature). The former refers to nature in the sense of that which is produced, the phenomena we observe with our senses. The latter refers to the unseen productive power which gives rise to the phenomena. In the animistic physics of the Middle Ages, souls played the role of naturing nature; they organized the autonomous development and behaviour of organisms, and motivated them by attraction... When the founders of mechanistic science expelled souls from nature, leaving only passive matter in motion, they placed all active powers in God. Nature was only *natura naturata*. The invisible productive power, *natura naturans*, was divine rather than physical, supernatural rather than natural. (Sheldrake 1990, p61-62)

The nature/supernatural distinction that Griffin pointed out obtained at the time of the founding of the modern world view is then, according to Sheldrake, due to the demise of animistic physics and the rise of the mechanistic view that divides explanatory categories into physical nature and active, non-physical supernatural. Thus, by the 17th century 'the souls that animated physical bodies in accordance with their own internal ends were exorcised from the mechanistic world of physics. Matter was inanimate and passive, acted upon by external forces in accordance with the mathematical laws of motion' (Sheldrake 1990, p61).

Further to this, Sheldrake believes that science is still informed by the mechanistic legacy, the result being that 'the only valid scientific explanations are mechanistic explanations' (Sheldrake 1990, p84). As with Griffin and Randall, Sheldrake claims that the explanatory history of phenomena that are intangible and

not easily reduced are assessed, perhaps incorrectly, under the current materialist world view as impossible and therefore paranormal.

Summary of the historic account

In summary, the supernatural explanatory category that historically accounted for psi events no longer available under the materialist framework. Furthermore, if the historic account is correct, science is most likely unable to readily account for the phenomena because the limits and scope of science were set when psi was classified as supernatural. With the transition the materialist world view, psi is consequently currently considered paranormal and unexplainable in scientific terms.

The accounts given by Sheldrake, Randall and Griffin rely on a broad sketching out of the trends in scientific and religious theory over many centuries. It could be claimed that they over simplify the scenario. I deal with this possible challenge to the historic account in the section below, before I emphasise the importance of the historic account to the current status of psi phenomena in relation to current scientific theory.

Defence of the historic account against the challenge that it is too broad

The bare bones of the historic account are reasonably uncontroversial. We know that psi-events were once considered supernatural (from historic accounts of psi-events) and we know that psi is currently defined as paranormal (from dictionaries and encyclopaedias). There is also evidence for the two transitions that are thought to have occurred and which have impacted on explanatory issues regarding psi. If one allows that the historic account is a very broad brush stroke account then these claims are uncontentious.

However, accusations could be made that the picture painted is too broad, there has never been a consensus on these issues, and there have been debates and opposing points of view along the way. For instance, one could argue that the sketch of trends and transitions does not do justice to the fact that there are philosophers of a dualist persuasion and there are, of course, scientists and philosophers who have supernatural belief systems, so for them the supernatural or

immaterial mind explanatory category is still an option, despite the apparent dominance of materialism in the sciences.

I am only able to defend the historic account against this challenge by conceding that it is a valid criticism, the fine detail is missing in this sketch and the controversies are more complex than the representation of historic transitions suggest. However, if it can be accepted as a rough indication of mainstream trends which have clear and obvious implications for psi, the historic account seems reasonable. This is because it is readily verifiable that psi is considered paranormal and psi was once considered supernatural by the mainstream authorities, even if there have been opponents to the mainstream assessment at these times. I argue then, that the historic account provides an important insight into the background beliefs that inform the mainstream assessment of psi. The most important assertion regarding psi taken from the historic account is the idea that the scope of science was set to deliberately exclude psi-like phenomena and that this background informs the assessment of psi today. I discuss this further in the next section.

3.1.3 Scope of science and psi phenomena

It is important to realise that the historic account puts the evidence for psi into explanatory context as it helps to explain why psi cannot be accounted for under the current scientific scope of lawful relations. For instance, to explain the influence that the modern worldview still has on the scientific perception of anomalous phenomena like PK Griffin comments that:

In the dominant thinking of the time [Newtown et al], the connection between the desire to exclude action at a distance in physics, on the one hand, and the desire to rule out all paranormal influence on and by human minds, on the other, was evidently something like this: given the dualism between (spiritual) mind and (physical) nature, excluding action at a distance from nature did not, strictly speaking, rule out the possibility that human minds might either receive or exert causal influence at a distance. (Griffin 1997, p20)

Possible explanation of PK phenomena was therefore excluded in order to keep all distant interaction with the world, in the spiritual or mental realm under a supernatural/dualist worldview. More broadly, under the modern worldview the evidence for psi, whether anomalous action at a distance or anomalous communication, was to be explained as supernatural and therefore outside of the realm of scientific inquiry and without further need to explain mechanistically in

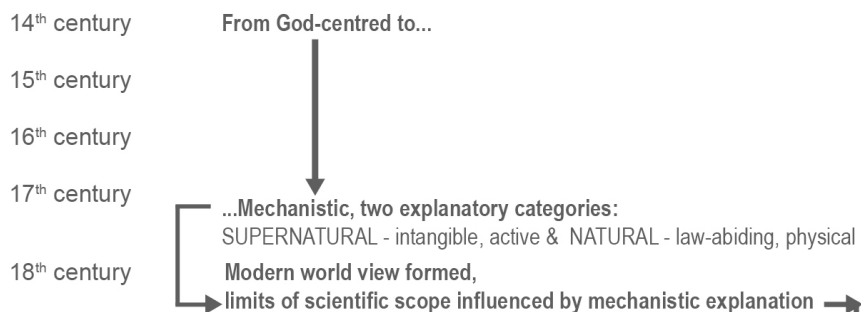
terms of natural laws. The result of this explanatory scheme was to exclude from the scope of science the means by which psi could be explained as natural. And with the subsequent change to predominance of the materialist worldview, combined with the decline of the supernatural/dualist worldview, evidence for psi events such as the movement of an object without any known mechanism or communication without the use of the five senses were left without recourse to either supernatural or mainstream scientific explanation.

The explanatory history of psi has informed some assumptions regarding the phenomena which should be made explicit. I deal with psi, and especially the unlawful nature of the phenomena, in relation to explanation theory in Part II of the thesis, so I will save further discussion of the problematic nature of explanation of paranormal phenomena until then.

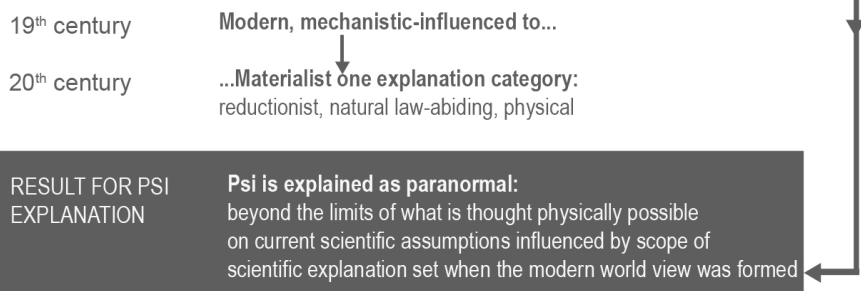
I have constructed a chart which clarifies how the sketch of trends outlined in this section impacts on the explanatory status of psi:

The Historic Account - sketch of trends

Transition 1: Medieval to Modern



Transition 2: Modern to Materialist



Psi

Natural

The chart is intended to illustrate the notion that the modern worldview was formed under the influence of mechanism when two explanatory categories were available for phenomena. However, the limits on science under the two-category mechanistic view influence the scientific assessment of psi events today thus relegating them to the unexplainable, paranormal category.

The historic account suggests to me that, if the body of evidence for psi is considered legitimate, then it is therefore pertinent to look at the perceived limits of scientific explanation in order to discover how best to approach explanation of the phenomena as natural. However, it can also be argued that, given the history of psi as a once generally considered supernatural phenomena, they should be reconsidered as divine in origin. I challenge this manoeuvre on the basis that psi phenomena are similar to other phenomena that are considered natural, even if one allows for a supernatural category of explanation in one's ontology.

3.2 Arguments against the Supernatural hypothesis

In this section I will make a case that the supernatural account is problematic on two scores. Initially, I will argue that the mundane nature of much of the evidence for psi indicates that even if supernatural accounts were part of one's explanatory scheme, psi events would not warrant such explanation. Some might argue then that some apparent psi events are not mundane in nature in response to this view, so I then show that phenomena of a more dramatic kind falls to the same criticism as the argument for theism based on religious experience. Then I will address the issue of experimental evidence and the anomalous nature of psi phenomena in relation to the Supernatural hypothesis. But first I will discuss psi and philosophical notions of 'naturalism' pertaining to the sciences and methods of inquiry.

3.2.1 Naturalism and psi

Psi, with its supernatural explanatory past and current status as paranormal, is an important bone of contention in this debate. It is important to come to terms with the nature of the body of evidence for psi in relation to naturalism if the realist and supernatural hypotheses are to be compared to the Skeptic hypothesis. I will

therefore now introduce the philosophical definitions of two different types of naturalism and then discuss the status of psi in these terms.

It is reasonably well understood that science deals with only those things that require natural explanation. It does not mean that the only things that require explanation are those that science deals with. For some – *methodological naturalists* – the most reliable method of inquiry is that which is undertaken by the natural sciences by whatever is deemed to be the most appropriate method. But methodological naturalists are not committed to holding that the *only* things that exist are natural. This view allows for natural but unexplainable things (such as some mind theorists hold regarding consciousness) as well as for those who maintain that there are things that require natural explanation along with things that require supernatural explanation. Methodological naturalism is an epistemic stance so there is consequently epistemological debate regarding what phenomena fit into which category. So methodological naturalism is a statement about how we go about explaining natural phenomena, but it doesn't limit the phenomena that require explanation to natural things. However, *ontological naturalism* proponents maintain that the only things that exist are natural. Most proponents of this view also maintain that the natural objects and their relations are to be explained by science and, even more strongly, only those things which are reducible to physical mechanisms are to be considered natural.

Psi is in a peculiar position in relation to naturalism. The historic account shows that psi, in the Western tradition, was considered supernatural at the time the modern world view was formed. The presentation of the body of evidence for psi in the last chapter showed that a small group of researchers has been investigating psi as a potentially explainable natural phenomena since the 18th century. Currently mainstream science and philosophy consider psi 'paranormal'. However, there is a case made for psi as a supernatural phenomenon which is put forward by contemporary theists; others disagree with this approach on account of the mundane, everyday nature of psi phenomena.

Despite the history of investigation of psi as a natural phenomenon by a small body of scientists and philosophers, psi is still associated with the supernatural by some theorists. It should be noted that this discussion is not about the common perception of psi as supernatural by the general populace, but rather the arguments put forward regarding the theological issues involved by current psi

theorists. The following discussion makes a case against the supernatural interpretation of psi events on two counts. First, the mundane nature of much of the body of evidence for psi is used to argue that when psi is mundane, if it is real then it should be considered natural even if it is currently unexplainable in these terms. Secondly, look at more dramatic, potentially supernatural instances of psi and makes a case that the same argument applies here as does the argument for deism based on people's religious experiences.

It could be argued that there it is not appropriate to divide psi into the two types of cases: mundane and dramatic. Instead, it could be maintained that supernatural events could also be mundane, and indeed are so in some belief systems. Conversely some events that are considered natural are also dramatic (such as hurricanes and the like). Discussion of supernatural vs natural categorisation are of concern to much theological discussion and a detailed examination is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I concede that these religious belief based assessments of what types of phenomena are commonly considered supernatural and what natural are open to myriad interpretations.

I acknowledge that other philosophers, such as Stephen E. Braude, have addressed such issues in the past and have convincingly argued a case for psi to be considered ostensibly paranormal rather than supernatural (Braude 1979, p244) without the need to draw a distinction between the mundane and dramatic categories. However, for the purposes of this thesis I take my cue from Swinburne and Williams' discussion of the paranormal vs supernatural distinction because it is the place I have found a reasonably contemporary mainstream theological discussion with specific reference to psi and I am concerned here to address the concerns in current mainstream literature.

3.2.2 Everyday psi

The following discussion will make a case for psi as a natural phenomenon on the basis that most apparent psi events occur in a similar fashion to other events which we currently consider explainable as natural occurrences in science. The case for a natural explanation for psi (debates about the evidence aside) is contrasted with the case for psi as a supernatural phenomenon.

The generic definition for something to be supernatural is reasonably clear. It is a phenomena that has its origins in something that is outside of the normal regular mechanistic, law abiding workings of the world. The explanation of the phenomena is ascribed to a deity or divine intercessor who has the ability to override the regular, mechanistic operation of nature. However, determining what phenomena are supernatural is problematic when one is dealing with phenomena, such as psi, that are also considered paranormal.

Similarly, although some anecdotal incidents of ESP can involve life or death situations, most psi events are also likely to be about more everyday matters that are not so dramatic. Take, for instance the anecdote related in the last chapter regarding the injury of the husband's jaw while sailing. This is hardly an event significant to any body other than the person it occurred to and involves only a minor amount of discomfort for the people involved. Would a divine agent really care to supervene the normal methods of communication in order to pass on such trivial information? Imagine if every scraped knee or cut thumb were to be given such status?

Supernatural explanation might be more warranted if, say, the event involved the wife taking action that saved the husband in some way. But there appears to be nothing more than the communication of a minor discomfort experienced by the husband to the wife at the same time as the incident took place. The apparent knowledge that her husband had injured his jaw did not instigate the wife to somehow help her husband avoid the accident, nor was the information required in order to help the husband return home relatively unharmed.

Amongst theologians the mundane nature of psi and its possible supernatural origins is a matter of debate. Richard Swinburne, a contemporary proponent of fine-tuning, makes the point that 'extraordinary events lacking religious significance are more appropriately characterized as magical or psychic phenomena rather than miracles.' (in Williams, 1990, p52) So for some thinkers the mundane and everyday nature of some instances of psi seem to indicate that even if a supernatural explanation is to be sought for other phenomena, such explanation should not be sought for psi because the events are not 'significant' enough for a divine agent to have the need to intercede. However, the theologian T.C. Williams argues otherwise in *The Idea of the Miraculous*. He argues that it is problematic to separate the potentially natural from the supernatural.

In contemporary times, many religions continue to maintain that psi events are supernatural in origin. In fact most major faiths consider the study of psi as ‘natural’ to be antithetical to their belief system, as many use psi-like events are used to support the existence of a supernatural being or beings. Christian religions, for instance, understand poltergeist incidents as possession by spirits. Miracles in the Christian tradition or magic in animist traditions are two examples of such beliefs. Williams makes this point explicitly when discussing whether psychical phenomena should be considered supernatural or paranormal:

Thus, in the first place... there is (a) the sense which may be characterized for present purposes as necessarily involving reference *to an invisible realm of ‘God(s)’*. Secondly, there is (b) the sense which centres on the basic *phenomenological* characteristic of the miraculous as this is to be found in the idea of a direct *mental* (and with this, *super/para-normal*) control over physical nature. That there is a strong contingent relation between (a) and (b) is obvious enough. It is plainly to be seen in the widely accepted religious assumption that evidence with regard to (b) constitutes a basis for belief in (a). At the same time, it is no less clearly the case that there is no necessary connexion between the two. Sense (a), for instance, might well be accepted without any rider regarding (b)— as, for example, in the view that, though there are ‘gods’, they may have neither the interest nor power to intervene in the affairs of men. Again there is no need to assume from the acceptance of (b) that there is necessarily a realm of the supernatural in sense (a). Conversely to postulate (b) is not necessarily to negate (a)... More immediately, however, there is the vital point that the sufficiency of the idea of the miraculous is to be seen as turning, in the last resort, on (b) above rather than (a). It turns, in short, on the (phenomenological) super-normality of the happening itself, as opposed to any presumed supernaturalistic ascription as to cause. (Williams, 1990, pp50-51)

As I understand it, Williams argues that everyday occurrences of psi have been associated with a supernatural explanation of cause, but that this should not necessarily be the case due to the more mundane nature of the events in contrast to ‘miraculous’ events such as are written of in Christian literature. He goes on to say that:

On the basis of the above, therefore, there is the clear conclusion that the miraculous need not necessarily be conceived in the exclusive terms of the biblical model of such events. What is philosophically most basic to the idea is, not any contingent feature relating to scale or bizarreness, nor any, necessarily speculative, claim as to origin, but, rather, the factor of some kind of super-para-normal willing. That is, more specifically - the phenomenological manifestation of purely mental, that is unmediated, control over physical nature. With this, too, there is the point that, as conceived in this way, there is nothing to negate the possibility of such events being brought about - even though, perhaps, only exceptionally, and not necessarily exclusively - by the direct volitional activity of *embodied* rational, that is *human*, agents. Nor, again, in this connexion, is there any necessity to relegate such events exclusively to the past. It might (conceivably) be the case that they are happening at the present time. Even, indeed, (again, conceivably) that they are, to some degree, repeatable. (Williams, 1990. p51)

In this analysis Williams argues that psi cannot be discounted as a supernatural phenomena on the basis that it is instantiated in the mundane and unexceptional,

but at the same time, he also allows that it is not possible to rule out the possibility that some or all of the events associated with psi are not of human origin. He leaves us confused as to what kind of explanation ‘should’ be sought for the phenomena, although he gives us a very good account of the problems associated with making this differentiation. His use of the hyphenated super/para-normal to describe the phenomena seem to indicate that he is not sure which he is dealing with in relation to psi phenomena. Despite this confusion in his wording I believe that he is making a case that psi should be treated as supernatural, although he allows that not everyone will want to accept this view.

I contend that if one is to advocate supernatural explanation for psi, as Williams appears to, there must be an additional reason to suggest that psi events are to be treated differently to other mundane events that are currently explained as natural even if the mechanism is, as yet, irreducible to purely mechanistic explanation. Williams himself appears to concede this point, but I think that if mundane instances of psi are to be ascribed to a supernatural explanation then every mundane everyday activity ought to be considered in a similar vein. If this is to be the case then Williams needs to explain why some events can be readily explained and others – like psi – are not. The invocation of a supernatural explanation for everything does not really achieve anything in explanatory terms and Williams is still left with the need to account for how it is that psi phenomena can be accounted for.

3.2.3 Dramatic psi

There are a number of accounts of psi which would not be popularly able to be accounted for under the ‘psi is mundane and therefore natural’ hypothesis. So, in order to comprehensively advocate a naturalist interpretation of psi events, I now deal with the Supernatural hypothesis as a general hypothesis that dramatic psi events are to be ascribed to a divine agent, the denomination of which is not of concern here. These are events that would not be able to be handled by the argument for a natural explanation on the basis of the normal, everyday nature of the phenomena as presented in the section above.

The types of psi events that I am now referring to are those that have some dramatic impact on a person’s life. For instance saving one’s own or a love one’s

life would seem to count as an act of significance. If one were to believe in a supernatural being then it would seem that the rescue or prevention of one's self or a loved one from death would be considered a dramatic enough incident to warrant the attention of a deity (broader theological issues as to what this means for people who do not have a deity 'looking over them' are beyond the scope of this thesis). In Louisa E. Rhine's book *Hidden Channels of the Mind* there are some accounts of dramatic events that could lead to death that were precognised and consequently acted upon which resulted in the saving of a person's life. These events are of particular importance to psi research, Rhine says, because they are of religious and philosophical significance due to the question they raise about fate (Rhine 1961, p 198). Earlier I gave an example of a woman who apparently acted upon pertinent information in a nightmare and saved her baby from severe injury or possible death by a falling chandelier. Here is another example of a potentially supernatural psi event because of its dramatic life-saving consequence:

During World War I the husband of a woman in California was chief engineer for a steamship company. He had been out to sea for about three months one time, when she was notified to go to Philadelphia to meet him. She left, and as she recalls "---on my arrival at Philadelphia I called the company. They notified me he would be at Pier 101 the next morning at four o'clock. I had a bath and shampooed my hair and went to bed at about nine-thirty pm. I dreamed that the ship came in, unloaded, and reloaded without my knowing and sailed for parts in India; and about thirty hours from India what they called a 'tin fish' hit the ship and sank her, and my husband was the only casualty aboard. When I awoke it was three-forty A.M. I tied my head up and had my clothes on in five minutes. In the meantime, I had called the desk clerk to get me a taxi. He took me to Pier 1010 and they were finishing tying up. I handed the taxi a ten-dollar bill, ordered him to wait, ran by a guard at the gate and up on the ship, hysterical and crying, and the guard chasing me. My husband was on deck and I ran into his arms saying 'Don't go, don't go, the ship is going down.'

When I was so very determined that he was to get off, he asked permission to be off. The company granted it. The ship sailed and her destination was India. She was torpedoed and sank. All the men aboard were on a raft for sixteen days, floating around before they were picked up.

When my husband went into the office here three weeks later they told him about the incident. (Rhine 1961, p200)

A case of pure coincidence? Divine intervention to save a man's life? Or anomalous cognition? Some people ascribe the Supernatural hypothesis to explain dramatic case, especially as the experiencers themselves often describe the information obtained as if by a 'message' or 'vision'. These words are akin to words that describe religious experiences. If this is so then an argument could be made for the Supernatural hypothesis on the basis that the experiences of a

supernatural nature and anomalous acquisition of knowledge are due to the existence of divine agents or supernatural beings.

The next section will outline the argument for deism from religious experience as well as the argument made against this by J.L. Mackie. The same criticism will be applied to the Supernatural hypothesis when derived from experiences that seem, to some, as if they had occurred through supernatural means.

It should be noted that arguments for survival based on phenomena derived from mediums are not dealt with in this thesis. Although such phenomena is of interest as, if valid, it may indicate that there is personality existence after death, a discussion of the resulting ontological issues is beyond the scope of this thesis. The psi debate, as outlined in the introduction of this thesis, focuses on regular psi phenomena and though I intend in the future to make an analysis of the survival literature I am unable to do so now because of the immense literature involved and the controversial problems concerned with validating this particular form of evidence.

3.2.4 The argument from religious experience

In one part of *The Miracle of Theism* J.L. Mackie examines the argument that religious experiences is evidence or proof of the supernatural which, aside from theistic doctrines or teachings, is defined generally as '*something further*, the reality of *some* higher but potentially friendly power' (Mackie 1986, p177).

The original theistic argument was developed because the problem of evil posed an awkward problem for theistic doctrines. Instead, arguments turned to religious experience as proof of a higher being. Regardless of faith or doctrine (sometimes atheists have been converted after such an experience) the event (feeling of union with a divine being, for instance, or communication received from what appears to be a divine agent) reveals to the person a higher, divine being as the source of the significant experience. It is acknowledged that the experience has dramatic effect on the person, for instance, a change from atheism to a belief in a God, but there is also an argument that maintains 'it may be held that the religious experience, as well as being valuable in itself, is also evidence, or even proof, of the objective truth of some associated beliefs' (Mackie 1986, p177).

Religious experiences then are taken to be indicative of proof for the existence of the supernatural, with obvious resulting ontological implications.

A certain category of psi experience can be equated to the religious experience. In these cases people experience access to information that ends up changing their lives (e.g. from a position of scepticism about psi phenomena they become avid believers) or they act on information that they should otherwise not have known and save their own, or a loved one's life (such as in the examples provided previously). Some people experience the acquisition of anomalous information in the form of guidance from a supernatural source or as if a divine agent is speaking directly to them in an anomalous fashion. These are the kind of psi experiences that would not be covered by the argument regarding the mundane nature of psi as warranting a natural explanation. So, the question then is: do some psi phenomena warrant a supernatural explanation?

I argue that they do not for the same reason as the argument for a deity from religious experience is also countered. Mackie makes the point that the argument for a supernatural agent from religious experience is problematic because 'if the religious experiences do not yield any argument for a further supernatural reality, and if... there is no other good argument for such a conclusion, then these experiences include in their content beliefs that are probably false and in any case unjustified. This, it seems, must be scored as a disvalue against them' (Mackie 1986, p186). The case is made on the basis that an analysis of the phenomena involved in various types of religious experience reveals that the phenomena do not empirically require a supernatural explanation, for instance saints who 'hear' God hear voices in their head similar to those of people who hallucinate. In general 'the undeniably real causal source of these impulses may be normally 'unseen' and not understood or articulately reported; but it is eminently understandable, and it belongs well within the same 'dimensions of existence' as other, wholly familiar, mental phenomena' (Mackie 1986, p184). This seems to put paid to the Supernatural hypothesis on the basis of religious experience as there is no evidence that cannot be accounted for in regular empirical terms, regardless of what the person who experiences the phenomena makes of the event. But what of psi?

The experience of psi does indicate that something occurs that is not currently considered possible in the natural workings of things according to

science. If psi experiences are legitimate then information can be acquired through non-normal means and movement of objects takes places without any known cause. Is this sufficient to ascribe the Supernatural hypothesis in the more dramatic cases? For we are not able, as in the case of the argument from religious experience, to maintain that there are already natural mental phenomena that can account for the psi experience.

What can be postulated, however, are normal explanations for the feeling that the information has been given by a supernatural agent. For, as in the case of the religious experience, normal explanations can account for the description of the events as being from a supernatural source. And the question must be raised that why should one life be saved over another? If a supernatural agent is responsible for saving the life of the baby sleeping under the chandelier, why are other babies allowed to die in preventable circumstances? The answer would seem to be because the nature of the psi event is not supernatural in origin but normal, even if unexplained, or potentially mistaken as anomalous. Once again I acknowledge that the scope of this thesis is unable to do justice to the broader discussions in theology and philosophy regarding related issues such as the problem of evil. I reserve further discussion on this point for the future.

3.2.5 Experimental psi and the Supernatural hypothesis

Experimental psi poses some interesting problems in regard to the Supernatural hypothesis, namely, because the anomalous nature of the phenomena dictates that experimental controls are put in place that discount natural cause for the phenomena. The negative definition of ESP and PK as anomalous only when regular sensori-motor mechanisms cannot account for the effects, raises questions about what is actually obtained when psi effects are observed. Experimental evidence for psi is largely obtained through long-run experiments using normal, everyday situations or simple tests. The content itself is not important (nobody's life is at stake when a ganzfeld experiment participant makes a stab at guessing the target picture). However, as Michael Scriven points out, there are broader ontological problems when it comes to the evidence for psi because of its anomalous nature. He maintains that although there is

no difference in principle between showing that one has discovered a new natural phenomenon and showing that one has discovered a supernatural phenomenon, as far as the basic experimental design goes. The design is—can only be—set up so as to exclude all existing natural explanations. (Scriven 1976, p185)

The problem then is if one successfully runs a psi experiment and obtains an above chance result and all protocols have ensured that there is no normal means by which this should occur, then what is shown to have occurred is something that has no natural explanation. Has one then obtained proof of a supernatural phenomenon or a natural phenomenon that has, as yet, no natural explanation? Both of these instances would dictate that the phenomena be produced through non-normal means and if the experiment is successful this is what will have been shown to have occurred. The evidence will be the same. Scriven deals with this situation as follows:

It will be clear... that the only circumstances under which one might plausibly be said to have demonstrated the existence of a supernatural phenomenon are those in which one has met the criterion for showing that it is not a natural phenomenon of the types so far understood, and also shown that it is so 'different' from those so far understood that it appears to be a case of 'another order of existence', and that it involves some agent or personality. (Scriven 1976, p185)

Scriven then contends that because of the anomalous nature of psi, any experiment that is designed to show that a psi-effect is taking place will be showing that something is occurring that is currently outside of the materialist framework. If this were not the case then it would not be an instance of psi. However, he argues that he does not believe that this indicates science should abandon its materialist/physicalist approach, nor that supernatural (as in the sense of divine or 'outside' agents) should be invoked. Instead he maintains that because psi appears to involve human agency 'no differences in parapsychology appear greater than those in physics, and the mere involvement of human personality hardly persuades us that we should abandon materialism or naturalistic explanation' (Scriven 1976, p185).

In another more recent forum Scriven revisited this argument and when asked: 'So for something to be truly supernatural, it would have to in principle be unexplainable, even in term of the physics of the far-distant future?' He replied:

That's the problem. It then becomes very difficult to see how you would establish that such a thing existed. But there is another way. If in fact it was connected to the intervention of a divine being or a family of beings, then that's a conventional part of the connotation of supernatural, and so one might well say that this was a supernatural event because it was pulled off by the conductor who orchestrates the things that break

all the rules. If there was evidence for that, then I would be quite willing to talk about those phenomena as supernatural. (Scriven interview Mishlove1998, online)

So for Scriven the natural and supernatural are both logical options but psi, because it does not appear to require the intervention of a 'divine being' should be considered as a natural, even if unexplained, phenomenon.

Summary of natural/supernatural discussion

I have shown that the Supernatural hypothesis runs into problems on two counts, firstly because of the mundane and everyday nature of the events that are described or elicited through experimental procedure; one would not ascribe a supernatural explanation to other everyday phenomena, why do so for psi effects just because the mechanism is as yet unexplained?.

As well, I have shown that even more dramatic instances of psi cannot be ascribed a supernatural explanation. I showed apparent psi experiences that are popularly ascribed to supernatural origins, elicit the same response as arguments for god on the basis of religious experience. I realise that theologians might contest this issue further by countering that belief in God requires faith not empirical proof, but further discussion of these more general deist arguments are beyond the scope of this thesis.

3.3 Application of the supernatural assessment on the psi hypotheses discussion

The arguments against the Supernatural hypothesis have a two-fold effect on the psi hypothesis discussion. Firstly, and most obviously, it means that the Supernatural hypothesis no longer forms part of the discussion of the competing hypotheses for psi. Secondly, less obviously, the assessment can be used to show that the hardcore skepticism regarding psi is unfounded. Hardcore skepticism is based on the notion that the acceptance of psi as legitimate necessitates a reversion to supernatural explanatory schemes. I examine the hardcore skeptic approach to psi in more detail below.

3.3.1 Hardcore skepticism and the Supernatural hypothesis

The hardcore Skeptic hypothesis is not a theory as such, hence it does not feature in the presentation of psi theory that was undertaken in the last chapter. Instead it is an a priori assessment of paranormal phenomena such as psi on the basis that acceptance of the legitimacy of such phenomena is a reversion to illicit superstitious explanatory schemes. It is traditionally upheld by those who also hold views of extreme scientism and active promoters of atheism. Advocates of this position are vocal in non-academic mainstream science journals (for instance, Michael Shermer, who's views are outlined below, has a column in *Scientific America* (Shermer 2003) as well as in the popular press. Although a minority (there are not many who would advocate such extreme scientism) they are prominent and influential and responsible for promoting their view strongly, which then filters through to the mainstream reception of psi phenomena in the general interested public as well as academia.

I therefore think that it is pertinent to use the analysis undertaken in this chapter to review the hardcore skeptical approach to explanation of psi phenomena, as the historic account combined with the arguments against the Supernatural hypothesis are relevant to the assessment of psi promoted by the hardcore skeptics.

The hardcore skeptical approach is exemplified by the science commentator Michael Shermer, co-founder of the USA Skeptics Society in 1992, who explains it as follows:

..myths, religions, and claims of the paranormal are lures tempting us beyond rational, critical, and scientific thinking, for the very reason that they touch something in us that is sacred and important—life and immortality. (Shermer 2005, p65)

According to Shermer, the paranormal and the supernatural are the same type of category of explanation for anomalous phenomena such as psi. Furthermore he contends the acceptance of the phenomena as legitimate challenges the rationality of science. When the hardcore skeptic account is presented, there appears to be some confusion from about psi's status current status as paranormal and what it means ontologically to ascribe a supernatural explanation for the phenomena. It is evident in the following assessment of the goals of science:

Scientism is a scientific worldview that encompasses natural explanations for all phenomena, eschews supernatural and paranormal speculations, and embraces empiricism and reason as the twin pillars of a philosophy of life appropriate for an Age of Science. (Shermer 2002, online)

For Shermer, psi, whether considered supernatural or paranormal, is something that just can't possibly exist. No matter what it looks like fraud or other normal explanations must be employed to account for the phenomena. (Shermer 2005, p63). The approach is different to the Explanation by Fraud Argument and the Modern Miracle Argument. Instead it appears to be founded on notion that if psi is accepted as legitimate, then society is in danger of reverting to superstitious explanatory schemes.

James Randi, a magician and professional debunker of the paranormal, is another such proponent. Randi is not a scientist, however, he is still called upon by the mainstream press to comment on the scientific evaluation of psi even though

his expertise is in magic and he has no scientific training²³. Randi and Shermer are both advocates of atheism and sometimes present themselves as defenders of ‘science’ and ‘rationality’ (Shermer 2005, p63).

The historic account sheds some light on how this confusion regarding psi’s problematic explanatory status in regard to science has eventuated. I suggest that the historic account gives us a hint as to the motivation of this group of radical psi commentators. The explanatory history of psi as a supernatural phenomena most likely informs the hardcore skeptic set up of the assessment of psi, which is to present a false dichotomy: namely, when one is presented with what appears to be psi one must choose between reversion to the supernatural explanation for such phenomena, or ascribe fraud to account for the phenomena.

The historic account indicates psi was once determined to be a supernatural phenomena and explained as such. In much of the mainstream literature that discusses psi there is confusion regarding the difference between psi’s current status as paranormal and its former status as supernatural. Sometimes the words supernatural and paranormal are used interchangeably. I suggest that psi’s explanatory history might inadvertently inform the hardcore skeptic’s apparent concern that re-acceptance of psi as produced by any other than fraudulent means would entail a reversion to older systems of supernatural belief.

Even if legitimately anomalous psi, it would appear, is mundane in nature. If the evidence can’t be explained readily through any of the three Fs (fraud, fluke or flaky methodology) then it should be treated as a natural, even if anomalous, phenomena. I conclude then that the hardcore skeptic proposes a false dichotomy based on a faulty assessment of the explanatory status of psi which does not take into account the history of the explanation of the phenomena.

We do not need to view psi as a challenge to scientific rationality on the basis that acceptance of the phenomena entails supernatural beliefs. Psi certainly poses an explanation challenge to science; it is not readily accounted for by any

²³ For instance when there was a controversy regarding the British physicist Brian Josephson’s statements regarding the legitimacy of evidence for telepathy, it was Randi who was interviewed on BBC radio. James Randi presents his view on telepathy and quantum physics as follows:

There is no firm evidence for the existence of telepathy, ESP or whatever we wish to call it, and I think it is the refuge of scoundrels in many aspects for them to turn to something like quantum physics, which uses a totally different language from the regular English that we are accustomed to using from day to day, to merely say, oh that’s where the answer lies, because that’s all very fuzzy anyway. No it’s not very fuzzy, and I think that his [Josephson’s] opinion will be differed with by the scientific body in general ... (MacGregor 2001, online)

known scientific theory. The challenge now is to come to terms with the anomalous nature of the phenomena. This can be perceived as less problematic if the current assumptions stemming from the creation of the modern world view are reconsidered using knowledge from contemporary philosophy of science. This challenge is one I take up in Part II of the thesis where I further examine the three remaining psi hypotheses, the skeptic hypothesis and the two realist psi hypotheses, in relation to issues of explanation in the philosophy of science.