

Beyond Beliefs

A philosophical examination of anomalous phenomena and explanation theory

**Beyond Beliefs:
A philosophical examination
of anomalous phenomena and explanation theory**

by
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Candidate's declaration

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You can't teach an old dogma new tricks

Dorothy Parker

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the dominant assessment of the anomalous phenomena associated with psi requires re-evaluation, as hidden beliefs and explanatory assumptions about the body of evidence underlie the mainstream philosophical arguments regarding psi.

A re-evaluation of pertinent issues with reference to contemporary explanatory concerns is therefore undertaken.

The current state of discussion about psi is outlined. It is shown that there is tension between the apparent evidence for the phenomena and lack of a tenable explanation for the phenomena. The mainstream arguments in philosophy, which ascribe fraud as an explanation for psi, are critiqued. In generic form the arguments are shown to be a problematic inference to the best explanation. It is argued that if the assessment of the phenomena is to be a legitimate inference to the best explanation the outline of the evidence, the compilation of hypotheses and the process by which the ‘best’ is selected requires re-assessment. The process of re-evaluation is carried out in the rest of the thesis.

The re-examination starts with an outline of the three types of evidence for psi. The discussion regarding potential explanation of the body of evidence for psi is shown to be similar to another problem in philosophy—the hard problem of consciousness. The competing hypotheses are then divided into comparable options in relation to psi theory: the Skeptic hypothesis, the Small Change Natural hypothesis, the Big Change Natural hypothesis and the Supernatural hypothesis. The unresolved debate about psi is thus transformed into a ‘psi hypotheses discussion’ which allows for more productive discourse regarding possible explanations of the phenomena.

An argument is made that changing explanatory schemes have historically accounted for psi phenomena and it is shown that one of the hypotheses, the Supernatural hypothesis, is untenable. The remaining three hypotheses are examined in more detail in the second part of the thesis.

A recent discussion between scientists and a philosopher regarding the potential to develop psi theory is used to show that when competing hypotheses for psi are debated, the contrary approaches to the data represent different research traditions. It is concluded that explanatory considerations regarding the various hypotheses require reassessment.

It is shown that an outdated explanatory system (the covering law model) has most likely influenced the mainstream assessment of psi phenomena and that this assessment has informed the dominant Skeptic hypothesis. However, because covering law model has been superseded by new theories of scientific explanation, an argument is made that a reassessment of the competing hypotheses is warranted.

An examination of the competing psi hypotheses in the light of three major contemporary explanation theories (causal, pragmatic and unificatory) is therefore undertaken. It is argued that the anomalous nature of psi usually prejudices the manner in which the explananda are presented. The psi explananda are therefore recast in terms acceptable to the contemporary explanation theories. Each competing psi hypothesis provides a possible explanation to the psi explananda. Then a comparison of the explanations is carried out using the precepts of each contemporary explanation theory as a guide to making an assessment of the competing explanations.

It is concluded that it is important the three psi hypotheses continue to be explored in relation to progress in science, psi theory and issues of explanation in science. The main achievement of the thesis is to provide a new platform for productive dialogue between the competing hypotheses with explanatory concerns upfront.

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Foreword

The study of psi in philosophy is controversial. Psi is often invisible in philosophical discussion because the plausibility of the evidence for psi is dismissed out of hand. However, there is a long and interesting history of rigorous investigation of psi and there are obvious consequences for philosophical topics if the evidence for psi is ever considered established. Unfortunately, the extensive literature which discusses the elusive phenomena is rarely represented in philosophical discussion. The study of psi retains a maligned status in mainstream academia today.

I became interested in the academic study of psi during my undergraduate years at the University of Sydney, where I was fortunate enough to happen across a considerable stash of psi literature which piqued my interest in the subject matter. Due to the Dewey Decimal cataloguing system in the infamous Fisher Stacks, a substantial collection of parapsychology texts were situated right next to the philosophy of mind books that were required reading at the time.

As I dipped into the heretofore unmentioned subject matter I became aware that there was much more to the investigation of psi than was recognised in most mainstream philosophy. The works on psi were intriguing, rigorous and worldly and the discussions lively and philosophical—I was enticed into the world of psi theory. At the same time I came to realise how invisible the subject matter was outside the small world of psi theoreticians and researchers; that psi doesn't exist is almost a mantra in contemporary philosophy of mind.

This thesis is not an attempt to change the minds of those who maintain that psi should not be investigated in philosophy because it is implausible, nor does it make an epistemic defence of the evidence against charges of fraud or flaky methodology. Instead, this thesis is an investigation of the explanatory issues that inform assessment of the anomalous phenomena. The aim is to provide a platform for more general philosophical discourse regarding psi. I hope that it becomes clear there is much to discuss.

Beyond Beliefs: **Introduction**

Lurking deep within the idea of explanation is a rudimentary appeal to rationality.

Charles F. Adams

This thesis is concerned with anomalous phenomena and explanation theory. The focus will be particularly on anomalous communication and anomalous action at a distance, otherwise known as telepathy and psychokinesis respectively. These two intriguing phenomena are often referred to under the umbrella word ‘psi’ (pronounced ‘sigh’). The mainstream assessment of psi in academia is to ascribe fraud or fluky results to account for the phenomena. Despite this a small but persistent group of researchers continues to investigate the phenomena as genuine. They maintain that fraud cannot account for the data and have developed various theories to explain the phenomena. The two approaches are unreconciled and a Catch 22 has developed. If fraud or fluke can’t account for the phenomena then some other theory must be employed, however, the mainstream will not accept psi until it is explained; but psi is unlikely to be explained until it is incorporated into more inclusive scientific problem-solving. There is therefore a tension between the apparent evidence for psi and lack of a tenable explanation for the phenomena.

I will partially resolve this problem by showing that the mainstream assessment of psi is first and foremost representative of *beliefs* about psi rather than an examination of possible *explanations* of the phenomena. It is hoped that the ensuing discussion takes the debate *beyond* beliefs—hence the title—by addressing the tension caused by psi phenomena with regard to pertinent issues in explanation theory from the philosophy of science.

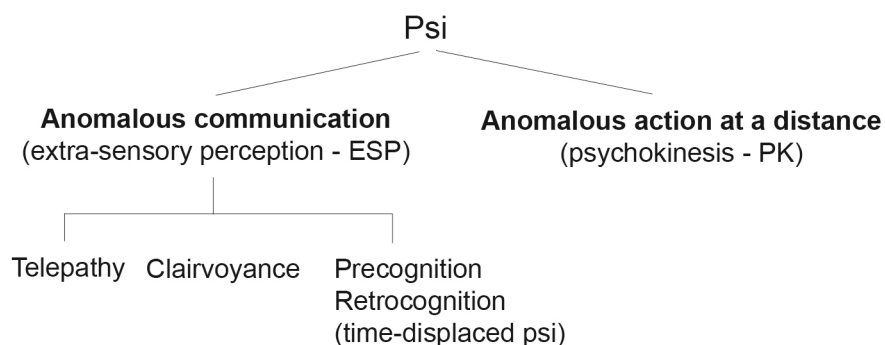
First I give a brief overview of psi and define the various components before clarifying the nomenclature used in this thesis. Then I outline the psi debate before sketching out the structure of the thesis.

0.1 What *exactly* is psi?

For millennia, psi events have been widely accepted as part of the human experience across many cultures. There is a lengthy literature on the performance of psi feats witnessed by credible people, and since the 1920s laboratories in university departments have replicated the phenomena to some extent. Consequently there has been a continued build up of historic, anecdotal and laboratory evidence for both anomalous communication and anomalous action at a distance.¹

The words that describe the phenomena covered by psi have changed over time and new words have been coined as theories about the phenomena developed. There is discussion amongst current theorists regarding the best way of defining and naming psi and the various effects associated with apparent evidence for the phenomena. This thesis is a philosophical (rather than psychological) discussion of psi, and I therefore draw in part on the work of the philosopher Stephen E. Braude as a guide to definitions and usage. Braude is a philosopher who has contributed significantly to discussion of psi and related philosophical issues. I also use the book *A Glossary of terms used in Parapsychology* by Michael Thalbourne as a standard for general definitions.

Psi is otherwise known as telepathy and psychokinesis. The former is anomalous communication and the latter anomalous action at a distance. Psi is commonly broken into the following elements:



¹ I outline the body of evidence for psi in Chapter 2 where examples of the historic, anecdotal and experimental evidence are provided.

I define the two types of anomalous phenomena that constitutes psi, ESP (and its three subcategories) and PK below.

Anomalous action at a distance – psychokinesis - PK

Anomalous action at a distance is thought to occur when matter is affected by a person without any known force or mechanism. The term psychokinesis, sometimes also known as telekinesis, is used to describe an event that appears to fall into this category. I will use the former term, which is often abbreviated to 'PK'. The target of PK can be an object outside someone's body or substances within the person's own body. To encompass both of these aspects of psychokinesis it is defined by Braude as:

the causal influence of an organism on a region *r* of the physical world without any known sort of physical interaction between the organism's body and *r*.
(Braude 1986, p220)

Importantly, PK is defined by what it is not; if something occurs that *cannot* be explained mechanistically by reduction to any of the four known forces then an instance of psychokinesis is thought to have occurred.

In the psi literature examples of evidence for PK are given on both the large, everyday macro scale and the micro quantum level. On the macro scale PK is evidenced by spontaneous cases such as those in poltergeist incidents in which objects appear to move without any known means. On the micro level anomalous action at a distance is measured by, for instance, the decay of an atom. I present more concrete examples in Chapter 2.

Anomalous communication – ESP - telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition

Anomalous communication is similarly defined negatively as the acquisition of information about a person or event in the past, present or future *without* the use of the ordinary five senses (taste, touch, sight, hearing or smell). The term extrasensory perception (abbreviated to ESP) is often used to cover the three forms of anomalous communication covered by this term. They are:

<i>Telepathy</i>	Information gained about another mind or minds without the use of the ordinary five senses.
<i>Clairvoyance</i>	Information gained about an inanimate object or event without the use of the five senses.
<i>Precognition/retrocognition</i>	Information about a person or event in the past (<i>retrocognition</i>), or future (<i>precognition</i>) without the use of the ordinary five senses.

All three types of ESP involve anomalous communication. The information is obtained either from another person, as in the case of telepathy, or from an object, as in the case of clairvoyance. Precognition and retrocognition are both time-displaced instances of either telepathy or clairvoyance, I refer mainly to precognition in this thesis as it is this form of psi-displaced psi that features more prominently in the literature. There are also more sophisticated discussions of the nature of ESP and its subsidiary categories differentiate between anomalous cognition and anomalous interaction (Braude 1979). It is also difficult to differentiate instances of telepathy and clairvoyance experimentally, which has caused one theorist, J.B. Rhine, to encourage the use of the term GESP (standing for General ESP) in order to account for general anomalous information acquisition. Specific examples of all three categories of ESP will be given in more detail in Chapter 2.

Psi researchers

The descriptions of people who are actively involved in psi research are also specific to the psi literature, so it is worth noting how they will be used in this thesis. In psi-oriented literature, proponents of the ‘fraud hypothesis’ (sometimes also referred to as the ‘Null hypothesis’) are referred to as ‘skeptics’. Academics who actively research psi are often called ‘parapsychologists’. However, because some academics who study psi are not psychologists and because some commentators on psi research are not academics and may include skeptics, I prefer the term ‘psi researcher’ to describe a person who has undertaken informed research into psi, regardless of their view.

Parapsychologists are usually not skeptics (why would anyone study a phenomena that they didn’t believe existed?) and skeptics rarely undertake

scientific investigation of psi (for a similar reason), but skeptical parapsychologists do exist. They are sometimes called ‘debunkers’ as they often undertake to publicly critique the work of non-skeptical parapsychologists. In such forums sometimes these commentators are divided into ‘believers’ and ‘skeptics’. Debunkers belong in the latter category and those that continue to research psi as a genuinely anomalous phenomena the former. Invective between the two approaches can sometimes be fierce and the terms ‘believer’ and ‘skeptic’ or ‘debunker’ have taken on a certain negative connotation depending on one’s point of view.² Although overall I prefer to use the term psi researcher (or if the writer is not a researcher as such then ‘psi commentator’) sometimes context requires a differentiation between the various approaches to psi. In such instances I prefer the terms *pro-psi* and *anti-psi* to differentiate these points of view rather than ‘believer’ or ‘skeptic’ which can contain insinuations that are not intended in this thesis.

0.2 Use of the word psi

The word psi encounters some usage problems. It is an abstract word which is not well-known outside of the psi literature. Nor is it readily easy to pronounce without knowledge about its etymology. For instance, some people mistakenly pronounce it *pea-ess-eye* when they first encounter the word. Confusingly it is sometimes capitalised (PSI) and can be mistaken for pounds per square inch or quantum theory references to PSI. However, there does not seem to be any reason to revert back to the older terms for anomalous events and the word psi is certainly shorter and less cumbersome in comparison to more archaic terminology. I therefore continue with the tradition of using psi as an unassuming term to represent the notion that an experiment or experience has registered an anomalous event indicative of ESP or PK that apparently cannot be explained through normal means.

² I have been witness to such invective between the ‘believers’ and ‘debunkers’ of high academic status when I was a participant in an international parapsychology email discussion list. The list eventually devolved due to the list host’s fears of libel charges (PRF 1998).

The word 'psi' is not new, it is the first letter of the word '*psyche*' in Greek. However, its use to describe what was once called psychic phenomena is relatively recent. 'Psi' was proposed for use in the area of psychical research by B.P. Wiesner and R.H. Thouless in 1942 to replace words such as 'psychic' or 'psychic functioning'. It was coined in order to avoid assumptions about what psi might be when little is actually known about its exact nature, or if it exists at all. It was hoped that, being more semantically neutral than previous terminology, any assumptions regarding the nature of the anomalous phenomena would be avoided. Thus, further unbiased investigation of the phenomena could then take place (Thouless 1972, p2; Thalbourne 1982, p56-57).

As a part of speech, the word 'psi' can be used by itself as a noun which refers to the apparent evidence for the anomalous phenomena previously described as 'psychic phenomena', 'psychic functioning' and 'psychic abilities'. Psi can also be used as an adjective to describes the anomalous nature of the apparent events or effects that are displayed when anomalous communication or anomalous action at a distance is thought to have occurred (Braude 2003, pxv). I adhere to the conventional use of the word in this thesis.

0.3 Status of apparent psi events

This thesis assumes that there is little familiarity with the body of evidence for psi in mainstream philosophy. The evidence is therefore outlined in some detail in Chapter 2 where it is shown that the body of evidence for psi is convincing enough to warrant examination. The phenomena are not easily explained away in normal terms, however, there is no dominant theory that has successfully accounted for the events. Accordingly the events can be best described as ostensibly paranormal. That is, they are currently unexplained, but not necessarily unexplainable (Braude 1979, p244). It will therefore be assumed for the purposes of this thesis that there is a putative body of evidence for psi which is comprised of evidence for what are most appropriately called *apparent psi effects* or *apparent psi events*. In order to keep the ensuing discussion of psi as semantically clean as possible I will not append 'ostensible' or 'putative' or 'apparent' before each mention of psi, psi

event or psi effect. These qualifications should be understood as implicit when psi is discussed in this thesis.

0.4 The psi debate

The psi debate is the main concern of this thesis and is its starting point. A small but persistent community of researchers think that the evidence for psi is worth investigating and that some kind of new, as yet undiscovered, explanation is required for the anomalous phenomena. This contrasts with the mainstream understanding of psi, which is to explain the evidence as either fraudulent, produced through flukes of coincidence, flaky experimental methodology or the product of self-deluded scientists. Currently the debate is at a deadlock.

Discussion between well-informed interested parties has not resolved the issue. This is evidenced by a 2003 publication of a special edition of *the Journal for Consciousness Studies* entitled ‘Psi Wars’. In this issue various anti and pro psi proponents make clear their contemporary assessment of the state of play of the evidence for psi phenomena. In the paper ‘Give the null hypothesis a chance’ James E. Alcock, a skeptical parapsychologist, concludes that

Thus, the search for psi will go on for a long time to come, for I can think of nothing that would ever persuade those who pursue it that the Null hypothesis is probably true. Yet, as this search goes on, those of us who are sceptics should applaud and support the approach taken by parapsychologists who have contributed to this Special Issue—not because we agree with their conclusions, for we shall continue to scrutinize and, when appropriate, find fault with their methodology and challenge their interpretations—but because they share our belief in the power of the scientific method to reveal truth in nature. I do marvel at their tenacity, however, for they labour in search of psi despite a lack of the evidentiary and other rewards that are earned by mainstream scientists in their research... I continue to believe that parapsychology is, at bottom, motivated by belief in search of data, rather than data in search of explanation. It is the belief in the larger view of human personality and existence than is accorded to human beings by modern science that keeps parapsychology engaged in their search. Because of this belief, parapsychologists never really give the Null hypothesis a chance. (Alcock 2003, p49)

In contrast, another paper in the same issue by Simon Sherwood and Chris A. Roe entitled ‘A review of dream ESP studies conducted since the Maimonides dream ESP programme’ concludes that:

Our review has shown that dream ESP remains a promising, if somewhat neglected, area for parapsychological research. Combined effect sizes for both Maimonides and post-Maimonides studies suggest that judges may be able to correctly identify target materials more often than would be expected by chance using dream mentation. There is evidence of conceptual replication within both sets of studies, although this

seems to be concentrated within certain research teams... We hope that this review will help re-awaken interest in this neglected but promising paradigm. (Sherwood and Roe 2003, p106)

There is obviously apparently little agreement amongst those who debate the topic within the parapsychology literature. The question that concerns me is: how can there be two such disparate views regarding the same body of evidence? There appears to be an unbreachable divide between those who consider the evidence for psi plausibly indicates a genuinely anomalous phenomenon and those who maintain that these people are self-deluded or mistaken. Reasoned discussion between the two parties, as represented in joint publications such as those quoted above, does not appear to be able to resolve the differences one way or the other.

In general there seems to be a resignation that the various proponents must just 'agree to disagree' as to what to make of the evidence. However, I think the lack of resolution to the dispute is harmful to both parties. If anti-psi proponents are correct then psi researchers are wasting time and money investigating a phenomenon that doesn't exist; if the pro-psi proponents are correct then mainstream science and philosophy is missing out on investigating new phenomena that are intriguing and, though anomalous, have the potential to impact significantly on contemporary theories of mind, time and causation.

The situation in the philosophical literature mirrors the debate in parapsychology. For instance Stephen E. Braude, a philosopher who has made a significant contribution to psi research, argues convincingly for the legitimacy of the evidence for psi in two of his earlier books: *ESP and Psychokinesis: A Philosophical Examination* (1979) and *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science* (1986). And he has more recently published another book *Immortal Remains* (2003) in which he draws on his earlier work to maintain that in response to the question "Do human beings have psychic (psi) abilities (ESP or PK)?...we can confidently answer "yes"" (Braude 2003, p2). He goes on to justify this answer and comments that it did not come easily, rather:

...researchers faced imposing and interesting problems concerning the nature and reliability of human testimony, and subtle and technical puzzles about randomness and probability. They've also had to confront a recalcitrant and incredibly annoying problem: namely, that if psychic abilities exist, then by their very nature they could elude all conventional experimental controls. (Braude 2003, p2)

The account he gives of the state of psi research is informed and reasonable. According to Braude it is apparent that, though difficult to come to terms with, the evidence (both anecdotal and to a less degree experimental) is convincing. The philosophical issues that are raised by the evidence have the potential to impact on theories of mind, causation, time and survivalist research. However, as I show in much more detail in the first chapter, the mainstream philosophical understanding of psi continues to propound that there is nothing to discuss because, it is asserted, fraud can reasonably account for the phenomena. The inspiration for this thesis stems from the desire to understand how to resolve the apparently unbridgeable gap between the mainstream view and the psi-oriented philosophical literature, which advocates that the body of evidence for psi is reasonably indicative of evidence for genuine anomalous events.

I think that it is more than a matter of an epistemic assessment of the body of evidence for psi. If the debate were so easily resolved the issue would not continue to be problematic today. Instead I maintain that the situation will remain unresolved until the background issues that inform the various stances are examined. I am therefore concerned with both the representation of psi in mainstream philosophy as well as the work that has been undertaken in the psi-oriented literature. I draw on both during the course of this thesis to come to a better understanding of how to close the gap between these disparate views.

0.5 Structure of *Beyond Beliefs*

In this thesis the initial assessment is grounded in philosophy by starting with an analysis of the dominant philosophical arguments regarding psi. In Chapter 1 the arguments are outlined and critiqued. It is shown that conservative explanatory considerations illicitly inform the arguments; the arguments are also shown to be pre-emptive inferences to the best explanation.

A case is made for a three-stage re-analysis in the form of a revised Inference to the Best Explanation, which is subsequently undertaken in the remainder of the thesis. The following chart indicates the stages in the thesis where the re-evaluation take place:

IBE stage	Section of thesis	Brief content summary
Stage 1 - E Evidence	2.2	Outline of evidence and theory, discuss issue of testimony
Stage 2 - $\{H_1, \dots, H_n\}$ Compilation	2.6	Compile the hypotheses based on current psi theory and comparison to the hard problem of consciousness
Stage 3 - H_n Process of selection	Chapter 3	Discuss background beliefs, present the historic account
	Chapter 4	Discuss competing hypotheses
	Chapter 5	Discuss dominant hypothesis
	Chapter 6	Compare remaining hypotheses

In more detail, the content of the chapters flows as follows:

Part I – Chapters 1-3

Part I sets the scene for the discussion in Part II and grounds the topic in philosophy.

<i>Ch. 1 Terra Incognita</i>	The mainstream philosophy arguments are analysed and critiqued. It is shown that the arguments are informed by explanatory assumptions. The result is that ‘unknown territory’ is opened up because the evidence for psi cannot now be automatically ascribed to fraud. An argument is made for a 3-stage re-analysis of the situation.
<i>Ch 2 Evidence and Theory</i>	The evidence and theory are presented. The hypotheses are compiled and the psi debate is recouched as the ‘psi hypotheses discussion.’
<i>Ch 3 Shifting Sands</i>	The history of the explanation of psi is examined, the historic account is presented and an argument is made against the Supernatural hypothesis.

Part II – Chapters 4-6

Part II continues the discussion of psi using contemporary issues in philosophy of science to help understand how to develop the discourse between the remaining competing hypotheses (the Skeptic hypothesis and the two psi realist hypotheses).

<i>Ch 4 Boundless Sea</i>	The remaining hypotheses are examined using a contemporary example – the analysis reveals that competing research traditions inform the contemporary discussion.
<i>Ch 5 Explanation</i>	Explanation issues that inform the research traditions are examined and a case is made that an out-moded explanation theory (the covering law model) still informs the mainstream assessment of psi.
<i>Ch 6 Terra Firma</i>	The psi explananda are recast and the competing hypotheses examined using relevant issues in contemporary explanation theory. The new territory is sketched out using contemporary explanation theory. The thesis concludes leaving the philosophical discussion regarding psi on firmer explanatory ground.

A more detailed summary of Part I follows before Chapter 1 commences a critique of the mainstream arguments for psi.³

³ I have appended a glossary of terms especially relevant to this thesis. It includes definitions for psi phenomena and related issues that have been covered in this chapter.