

Is Something Missing in Psychological Research?

Michael Grosso

Philosopher Michael Grosso considers the history of psychical research and its uneasy status within academe owing largely to the materialist ethos that has come to dominate both intellectually and politically. He argues that psychical research has something valuable to offer a new world view and offers a number of potential story lines to that effect.

The challenge of physical science

Ever since the rise of modern physical science in the 17th century, resistance to the traditional belief in the reality of soul and mind has grown. Among the educated classes, the belief in a life after death is in decline. With the triumph of technology, we have moved more deeply into an age of philosophical physicalism.

There has, however, been ample criticism of this reductive turn, often from scientists. In fact, there's a tradition of empirical-minded challengers to the popular creed of scientific materialism. It has long been observed that events sporadically occur in ways that violate our expectations of what is physically possible. The need for a systematic study of these phenomena eventually crystallized into the founding of the English Society for Psychical Research in 1882.

I use the expression *psychical research* broadly to cover a wide range of extraordinary experiences, paranormal and mystical. The common feature is their transcendent character; they appear to exceed the limits of known physical law. There is a long-lived, mainstream tendency to ignore these anomalies.

The historical record, as far as I can make out, points to a constant relationship: there is the evolving Science with a capital S and a relatively small group of outliers who profess allegiance to the importance of psychical research. As far as our "educated" authorities, for the most part it is dismissed as deviant and fringy.

Still, we always find some heretics, even among the founding members of the British Royal Society such as the chemist Robert Boyle and Joseph Glanvill who

wrote a book called *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*.ⁱ In the 18th century, there was Mesmerism and its “higher” phenomena that disturbed the establishment. The 19th century of materialism triumphant saw the birth of Spiritualism and European psychical research. In the 20th century, the Rhines’ American parapsychology resisted behaviourism; Freud, Jung, Gardner Murphy and others acknowledged the paranormal, and kept the landscape of the mind open.

As for the situation today, it still corresponds to the early pattern: a minority of outliers, often distinguished in their fields, largely ignored by the dominant power structures, the prelates and the professors, the church and the university, and usually, the press.

At every stage in this historical development, some have been optimistic about psychical research bearing great fruit.ⁱⁱ The circumspect William James, however, claimed progress more likely to be very slow, measured perhaps in centuries, not decades.

The situation today

Knowledge in the field has surely grown, but the status of psychical research, compared to that of the established sciences, remains unchanged. It rarely gets a fair platform, as do sports, politics, economics, the arts, medicine, and all the sciences.

Reasons for this are obscure. First, there’s the huge cognitive dissonance it seems to engender, challenging the metaphysical identity of science and perhaps of scientists. If only there were repeatable experiments, some have said, established science would be more welcoming. Questions today are asked about replicability in *all* domains of science, and nature can be perverse in the way she responds to our scientific probings.

However, psychical research *does* offer repeatable experiments, but very rarely repeatable *on demand*. Phenomena like telepathy and psychokinesis have repeatedly been produced experimentally, by different subjects and in different contexts.ⁱⁱⁱ Even shocking macro-PK such as levitation has repeatedly been observed, for example, in the most famous case of Joseph of Copertino, for which we have ample eye-witness testimony, 35 years running.^{iv}

Psychical research has amassed an enormous amount of data that is of great practical and theoretical interest, but remains an illicit field of study. It is the vanishingly rare university in the United States where the subject is studied.

What's missing, some say, is a theory that explains, predicts and controls the wayward phenomena. But psychic phenomena are not so well-behaved. When I met Dr. Emilio Dido, who was once Padre Pio's physician, I asked for his opinion of psychical research. Dr. Dido spoke of "psi" as "a rebellious reality," and smiled ruefully at me, as if to say, "Good luck!"

There seems, in fact, something wilfully perverse, "evasive," as researchers have often noted, about psychic phenomena.^v Clearly, their baffling elusiveness, more than once noted by William James, resist efforts to theoretical domestication. I doubt that any one theory could be the tipping point whereby psychical research crashes through its 400-year-old ceiling. The fact is there are good theories and experimental paradigms that work, and which have produced interesting results. But in spite of all the good work done, the underdog status of the field as a whole remains intact.

More research, repeatable experiments, more penetrating theoretical constructs are all desirable and crucial to progress. But none, I believe, is likely to succeed in shattering the wall of corporate materialism, which dominates the academy, as well as politics, militarism, economics, and global trends.

The problem is not just academic or intellectual. The words *materialism* and *materialistic* need be distinguished. Materialism is a metaphysical belief; materialistic is a morally tinged term, suggesting a default preference for material solutions, explanations, aims, values. Economic and technological forces have "disenchanted" the world, as Max Weber thought, the result of capitalism becoming entangled with the rise of material science.

Psychical resistance and the need for story

Psychical research is a stubborn hold-out against this ever-creeping disenchantment. Still, is something missing in the current paradigm? Why has it for the most part failed to captivate the wider public imagination? In my opinion, a story is missing. What seems missing is a vision, a worldview to help us breathe life into the motley mass of collected data. Lacking are stories that unify the project of psychical research; in human terms, stories that make explicit its aims and benefits. Stories were the natural *modus vivendi* of psi before modern science.

For most of history, the "psi factor" in nature was part of a person's or culture's life story. It played a crucial role informing a worldview, a practice, a mythology – or a religion. It made a difference to daily perception, expectation and behaviour. Whether through magic, religion, or the arts, the "data" always

meant something important. It was not a question of anomalies, or counter-examples, or evidence for or against a carefully framed hypothesis. It was part of the unspoken art of how one improvised life and death.

Needless to say, the psi-laced narratives of pre-scientific times have for most educated people ceased to be credible.^{vi} The creation stories may be dismissed as just word-magic, and have no place in a scientific worldview. Much of the old language carries undesirable connotations. So people now say they are spiritual but not religious. Organised religion suggests dogma, intolerance, violence. Some of the worst crimes against humanity are routinely justified by religious claims. In contrast, the term *spiritual* has been granted a positive sense, and is seen as compatible with science.

The primacy of experience

But now, *whatever* the prevailing worldview, people continue to have experiences with the earmarks of transcendence. Sometimes the language may be lacking for describing a specific experience. A man, for example, related to me an experience in which he fell off a fast-moving boat; trying to grab hold of anything to break his fall, he felt something slowing his movement, which enabled him to grab a cable that stopped him from being swept under.

The remarkable part of the story is that two witnesses on the boat reported that they *saw* their friend hovering in space as he reached for the saving cable. The person who told me this story admitted he was reluctant to discuss it in public. The best word he could think of to describe his experience was “miracle.” But he felt embarrassed to use that term.

The idea that gravity is malleable and sometimes behaves oddly in ecstatic or other extreme mental states, suggests that the experience was neither miracle nor illusion – but something yet to be explained. Call it, if you prefer, a type of transient levitational episode. Dale Allison, professor of religious studies at Princeton University, has summarised modern cases of transient levitation of this sort in a report. The story of the man who fell off a boat was one of similar stories I heard after publishing *The Man Who Could Fly*, a study of the famous levitator, Joseph of Copertino.

New stories of transcendence will come from our new experiences. The poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti once said that in modern times each of us has to create and live our own myth. Frederic Myers, one of the founders of psychical research, coined the term *telepathy*, and another important word, *mythopoeia*, or myth-making.

Myers' *telepathy* has had a thriving life since its inception, but not his coinage pertaining to the mytho-poetic. Again, from a different perspective, what seems missing from psychical research--the mythopoeic spirit. But not completely. I can think of three great masters of modern mythopoeia--William Blake, William Butler Yeats, and Walt Whitman. Each of them created their poetic mythologies from their psychical adventures.

We don't need to be great poets to explore meaning and transcendence in our experience. Several ideas come to mind of stories that might advance psychical research. Each might be a chapter in a book, or a book itself. All I can do here is list some possibilities to illustrate my suggestion more concretely, that there is a need for stories that invest psychical research with purpose, stories that practically engage our presumptive higher potentials.

Possible Stories

A New Health Care Paradigm – what comes to mind at once is the need for a new health care paradigm. In America, the richest nation on Earth, the health care system is ranked below all the rest of the advanced economies. The cost of serious illness can destroy you financially unless you are rich. Among the greatest dangers to your health are those that come from the medical establishment itself: hundreds of thousands die annually from medical error. America is in the midst of an opioid epidemic that is killing more citizens annually than were killed in the whole of the Vietnam War. The epidemic is in large part caused by the pharmaceutical industry with complicit medical practitioners for whom profit is the crucial value.^{vii}

A new healthcare paradigm would still deploy the best of mainstream medical science. But it would do so selectively and critically. A feature of the new paradigm would be its emphasis on the importance of noninvasive, spiritual, and self-healing potentials such as prayer, fasting, meditation, dream incubation, trance-dancing, and other traditional methods of health-care. The new paradigm would favour a health-care system in which parasites like Big Pharma are starved to extinction. There is much movement in this direction already, evident, for example, in the books of Larry Dossey, ranging from his best-selling study of prayer (*Healing Words*) to the prescient *Reinventing Medicine: Beyond Mind-Body to a New Era of Healing* (1998). Psychical research in service to a new healthcare paradigm; this would be my first choice of a story.

Search for an Afterlife – psychical research has produced a significant body of evidence that points to the real possibility of life after death.^{viii} But this is not generally known. Making it known is part of a big story that needs to be told. In our age of scientific physicalism, incredulity about posthumous survival seems almost inevitable. The dramatic shift toward materialism has created a vacuum of meaning regarding life and death. Reductive scientism provides a depressing picture of the human condition: a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.

Psychical research has furnished evidence that points towards the continuity of consciousness after death. In light of information so garnered, a new story of life and death--one with a transcendent twist--becomes possible. This second story-line of psychical research seems also to qualify as part of the new health-care paradigm discussed above. C. G. Jung wrote of the psychic need for a story about death. To become reasonably functional individuals, the idea of death needs to be woven into our sense of self.

Ernest Becker's (1974) classic study shows how the "denial of death" (title of his book), rampant in modern culture, distorts the human personality, even whole societies. Consumerism and inordinate greed for wealth and power illustrate the dialectic of this repression. The denial of death impairs our capacity to live, causing us to contract from life because of fear of death. This fear so disfigures us, Becker argues, that we can easily slip into the clutches of rogue agents.

Becker concludes his book with a grim warning; science must figure out a way of deconstructing the denial of death or risk failing to prevent the suicide of the species. It never occurred to him, as it did to Frederic Myers, that psychical research might provide the basis of a new mythology of death and transcendence, a view more conducive to psychological health.

Links to the Theory of Evolution? – is there a link between psychical research and human evolution? This question leads to another story. Psychical research may be viewed as a story about the next step in human evolution. The entire spectrum of supernormal mental and physical phenomena enable us to form a picture of the next stage of evolutionary advance.^{ix}

The advance would mean a major refinement of our sensory and motor capacities. Extrasensory sensibility would be normalized, integrated with sensory life. Our psychokinetic potential would also in some clearly discernible sense be extended beyond the limits of normal motor capacities. What problems our heightened faculties may bring we can ignore for now.

In this snapshot of the new phase of our evolution, based on projection of latent potentials, we must include mystical and ecstatic states. As is known, phenomena like levitation and bilocation are reportedly byproducts of certain mystical states. There are many ways to imagine the course of this more evolved humanity, and how it might affect society at large. The main story-idea here is to read the realm of psi phenomena as indicators of the unfinished story of human evolution.

Social Critique – My next suggestion may sound a bit novel for this field of inquiry. Thanks to our information and communication technologies, we're living through a period of accelerating change. Psychical research provides a platform to resist the triumphalism of techno-materialism. There is, after all, a certain idolatry of physicalist science. Most social critics (from Marx to Marcuse) are themselves materialists, albeit of the "dialectical" sort. But if we mean to critique the evils of capitalism and the excesses of technology, we need to throw off the shackles of philosophical materialism.

The critical task is not just academic; it examines the functioning values, secret manoeuvrings, devices of distortion (law, propaganda, advertising), whatever forces mould a society where materialistic values predominate over human values; where power and profit overshadow meaning and dignity. Critique sometimes shades into resistance, as when Wolfgang Pauli refused to join the Manhattan Project whose purpose was to make atomic bombs.

The Art of Living – One last suggestion on how we may bring psychical research to life, use it perhaps as an ally in the art-the task – of living. Psychical research affords us with material for re-shaping our worldview. The various strands of phenomena converge to expand our view of what is possible in nature. It provides excellent raw material for the mytho-poetic imagination to work with. Psychical research is about experiences that transcend the constraints of material life. This opens the way of looking at the world and at key points in re-fashioning one's life story and identity.

Conclusion: in search of a new mythology of transcendence

So much for variations on the theme of how to integrate psychical research into the wider concerns of life. The challenge is to create stories that show how the research speaks to archetypal issues such as health, death, struggle against oppression, the nature of reality, what it is to be human, and so on. I have suggested a few story-lines for bringing psychical research into relief: the role it might play in forming a new healthcare paradigm; a broadened perspective on

the meaning of death; a clue to our evolutionary future; resistance to the ideology of materialism; and finally, as a resource in the art of forging one's own story and identity.

These are suggestions. Others are possible. What is perhaps missing is the spirit of what Myers called *mythopoeia*, the active myth-making dimension of psychical research. A story to believe in that brings together all the elements and infuses them with the *energeia* of life itself.

Psychical research offers a rich palette of existential possibilities that would be dead in the water of reductive materialism. Adding psychical phenomena is like an artist adding colour to a black and white composition, or a traveler on a two-dimensional surface suddenly cutting loose into the depths and heights of space.

Psychical (soulful) research invites us to explore the hidden depths of ourselves, so easily occluded by an increasingly invasive techno-civilisation. If physical science has tended to invalidate the psychical, it falls upon psychical research to rectify that fundamental distortion. Science and human experience agree that we need to restore the psychical dimension of being to its rightful place.

Not just a matter of academic interest or intellectual correctness, we need to ask: What do ingrained assumptions of materialism imply for how we live? A materialist, like Thrasymachus in Plato's *Politeia*, believes that might makes right. Militarism, it seems to me, follows from materialism. The same can be said for the economic system of capitalism, whose sole principle and *raison d'être* is profit, a strictly materialistic value. Consumerism would follow from the same matrix. The fact is that consequences follow from worldviews. If we are nothing but our physical brains, then all that is humanly interesting must be relegated to the realm of illusion.

Modern material science has unwittingly placed us on a collision course with global catastrophe, having created a nuclear Frankenstein monster and set into motion a race toward climate Armageddon. In face of this, I hold that the story of psychical research is the story of the soul of humanity in the battle for its survival on Earth.

ⁱ A short, valuable look at this period: *Joseph Glanvill and Psychical Research in the 17th Century* (1921) by H. Stanley Redgrove.

ⁱⁱ Arthur Conan Doyle's *The New Revelation* (1918) proclaimed that Spiritualism, which to him proved life after death, might become the basis of the unity of diverse religious faiths. J. B. Rhine thought of parapsychology as a weapon to wield against Godless Soviet communism.

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- iii Try the first dozen volumes of the English Proceedings of Psychical Research, which makes for much important reading and then for a recent, massive review of the data, *Irreducible Mind* (2007) Eds. Kelly&Kelly, Rowman & Littlefield.
- iv *The Man Who Could Fly: St. Joseph of Copertino and the Mystery of Levitation*. 2016; and also Bernini's *Vita* of the flying mystic, *Wings of Ecstasy*, 2017. Bernini provides example after example of eyewitness testimony of the saint's wondrous performances. By showing him in his world, it's clear his phenomena are in tune with a ferociously intense Baroque sensibility.
- v The case is made by I.E. Kennedy, The Capricious, Actively Evasive, Unsustainable Nature of Psi: A Summary and Hypotheses. *Journal of Parapsychology*, Vol.67, Spring 2003, (pp. 53-74).
- vi There are exceptions to this, as evident in the works of C. G. Jung
- vii Peter Gotzsche's *Deadly Medicines and Organized Crime: How Big Pharma Has Corrupted Healthcare* (2013).
- viii The evidence here is vast and varied. One might begin by scanning the Proceedings of the British Society for Psychical Research. Among some recent overviews, see Alan Gauld, *Mediumship and Survival*, 1982; Stephen Braude, *Immortal Remains*, 2003; Ed Kelly (ed.), *Irreducible Mind*, 2007; etc.
- ix I attempt to do this, to some degree, in my commentary on Bernini's *Vita* of Sa, n Giuseppe, in my book, *Wings of Ecstasy*.

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