

Lawfulness Versus Caprice: Is There a "Law of Psychic Phenomena"?¹

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I

More than a half-century ago Thomas Jay Hudson offered an extraordinary book to clarify the newly gained data in psychical research under the title *The Law of Psychic Phenomena* (3). His basic generalization was very simple: There are two kinds of mind—conscious and subconscious. The conscious mind, which is capable of generalized and inductive reasoning, deals with the world of sense data and immediate reality; the subconscious mind, which is capable of deductive reasoning only, deals with the paranormal. Hudson did not really describe any laws of psychic phenomena. Yet I think his contribution was valuable, because it taught us to look for real laws, real principles to replace the chaos and seeming caprice so characteristic of our field.

Much of Hudson's conception of the subconscious was already familiar from the early work of the (London) Society for Psychical Research, and its masterful exposition is to be found in F. W. H. Myers' *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (7). We owe to Myers much of our understanding of the dynamics of genius, of sleep and dreams, of dissociation, and of the portals thence leading into the world of the paranormal. Myers believed fervently, as did Hudson, that there is lawfulness in the subconscious, in the subliminal, in the world below the threshold of consciousness. Myers, in point of fact, went further, for he offered many laws, some of them cross-articulated with one another, and some of them rather well buttressed with the case material of his day. The fact that today Myers seems to have been rather hasty in some of his conclusions is not destructive of the beauty of the intellectual system which he created; in fact, if he had been cautious, he would have built only a series of scattered towers, cupolas, and arched façades, but not a system of intellectual architecture.

But the problem facing us today is whether there really is a law of psychic phenomena, such as Hudson asked us to believe, or a system of interrelated laws, such as was offered by Myers.

¹ This paper was delivered by Professor Murphy at a meeting of the Society held on March 16, 1964.

It may well be that there are dozens of limited principles derived from research, dozens of interrelated, but essentially independent, poorly integrated propositions which are not really bound together by any law now known, or even knowable, to man. It may well be, as William James (5) suggested, that the whole world is essentially a loose-jointed assortment of odds and ends; not a universe, but a pluriverse. And it might well be, as James tended to think, that psychic phenomena are themselves odds and ends, capable of no ultimate systematic interpretation or affiliation with the laws of normal psychology, or even with one another. What I am asking you to consider this evening is the choice between lawfulness and caprice; or, if you like, between a block universe of solidly ordered phenomena and a system of bits and pieces to be grubbingly sought out by mole-like empirical methods.

There can be no doubt that the trend toward radical empiricism, as James (6) called it, has been dominant in recent decades; that we have sought specific facts from specific experiments; that we have tried to walk the way of the experimental sciences; indeed, that very few bold, systematic theories have been offered, and those which have been offered seem to have been knocked down rather easily by the presentation of more and more and better and better controlled experimental facts.

I am going to go a step further. I am going to suggest that the failure of psychical research to produce any truly repeatable experiment in the course of its entire history suggests that there is no "law" in Hudson's sense, no system of laws in Myers' sense; or at least that there is no orderly pattern, which we are capable of perceiving, to bind and structure the phenomena of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, retrocognition, psychokinesis, and the rest.

I will grant immediately that a number of restricted and limited principles seem to have stood up rather well: the principle of the incline curve (doing better and better as one continues in an ESP test) and the decline curve (doing worse and worse); the principle of salience (success at the beginning and end of the run or at certain critical moments in the run); the principle of motivation, which says that success is related to the need to succeed; the principle of free association, and the principle of potentiation. These are, in fact, principles which I should be reluctant to give up. But at the same time, you will note that they are not laws in Hudson's sense or in Myers' sense; they are merely generalizations regarding very limited conditions of observation, conditions which apply in card guessing or similar types of performances. They are hardly principles which can plausibly be brought into relation to the laws of general psychology; they are hardly principles which,

even if decked out with much tinsel and much wishful thinking, can be said to be universal postulates in a budding science. Indeed, as I have already hinted, if we had firm and solid principles it would be simple to put them to work, build up an experiment utilizing one or two or all of them at once, and get the repeatable result which we have all been asking for.

If you say that this is unfair because we cannot control all the conditions, I will reply that we cannot even control them to the point of getting, at will, a result which is significantly different from a chance result. This challenge has been before us for years, for decades, and although we have congruent data which I would be among the first to applaud, I would also be among the first to say that these laws are not universal. What would you think of the chemist who undertook to show that hydrogen and oxygen can, with a spark and a bang, produce water; but most of the time he doesn't know whether it will work that way—finding, in fact, that it bangs on alternate Tuesdays in some laboratories, in other laboratories on alternate Saturdays, and, as Eddington (1) has said, behaves as it wants to behave most of the time. Let me say just once more that I *do* believe there are a few relative laws, or statistically impressive generalities in narrowly defined conditions; I do *not* believe that there are "laws" in the sense in which science tries to formulate laws.

Now my conclusion is not pessimistic, or nihilistic, or intended to be evasive or discouraging. On the contrary, I believe that there *are* working principles, but that we shall have to look in new directions to find them. What Hudson was trying to do, and what most of us have tried unsuccessfully to do, was to find generalizations of the sort that Y is a function of X, and to express these generalizations in quantitative language in what is usually called a parametric form: that is, the *more* of this, the *more* of that. Heat the bar, and it expands; increase the motivation in an ESP experiment, and you get higher scores. I do not believe that parametric laws have been discovered, and I am not sure that they are going to be discovered by any of our present methods.

II

But it is possible that the paranormal presents not a system of laws, but a very different kind of reality: namely, a sort of vehicle or modality in which reality may express itself. Since the idea is going to be rather complicated, I will begin with a very simple physical analogy. I will remind you that waves may be propelled either in air or in water; the type of waves reflects the medium which carries them. (I will not discuss electromagnetic waves for

they are complex; air and water waves will serve my purpose perfectly well.) The essential idea is not the kind of wave, but the fact of a medium or a vehicle which makes possible the transmission of information from one point in a time-space continuum to another; indeed, we may transcend altogether the problem of time and space and speak of the vehicle as that which transfers information from one point to another so that it is seen in a new way. If you ask whether it is a *material* vehicle or not, I can only say that it is probably not the classical material of classical physics.

This emphasis upon the fact that basic events can be made known through a vehicle is the heart of my story. Suppose, for example, that I am trying to convey to you the number three. I can make three chalk marks on a blackboard, or sound three siren tones, or unstop three perfume bottles in the course of a visit to a parfumeur's laboratory. Here is information which can be said to have been transported from one region to another. If the number three can be conveyed, perhaps more complicated information can be conveyed. If, in this way, I have a telepathic impression that my brother is drowning at a distant beach, and if this is verified, then we may say that something has transferred the reality from one time-space region to another; in other words, that I have been brought into relation with a distant event. In the same way, if I make contact with some striking incident in the past in a way which can be verified, as in the extraordinary studies of Señora Maria Reyes de Z. by Walter Franklin Prince (9), I have in some way reached into another group of unknown regions. And if I have a precognitive impression which can be verified of events in the Kremlin or in interspace or in my own life, fulfillment would indicate that some sort of contact with the future was made through this vehicle or medium I am trying to describe.

Even if this medium were a vacuum, a complete emptiness, this would not bother me in the least because what we conceive today to be emptiness is merely the absence of the kinds of material stuff that we know about. As we go on finding out more and more about such stuff, and more and more about emptiness, we are less and less certain what the difference really is between them. I am suggesting, then, that the reality of psychic phenomena is a reality regarding *transposition* from one time-space region to another. Please note that in this way there is *no new information* ever conveyed by the paranormal process; there is only a transposition. The drowning of which I have a paranormal impression is the same drowning regarding which other information is at hand. Nothing new is discovered or invented by the paranormal process; the distant event is merely perceived, as through a time tube, or a time-space tube. The same is true regarding paranormal

perception of events in the past or in the future. Consequently, it would be a profound error to speak of the paranormal as a way in which we gain new information; we do not gain *new* information by way of the paranormal—it merely makes information accessible to us under conditions when it would not ordinarily be accessible, according to our present knowledge.

I think you will see where my argument is tending. There may be thousands of laws that relate to the nature of the modality or vehicle that I am hypothesizing. These laws may be very simple or very complicated, but they are not laws relating to cognitive content; to things seen, or heard, or felt. They are not laws relating to perception and memory, thought and imagination. Indeed, the perception and memory, thought and imagination that we encounter when we study psychic events are the same old perception and memory, thought and imagination that we have always known about. The psychological laws which have been found to be relevant to extrasensory perception are also laws which are relevant to ordinary perception: laws relating to motivation, facilitation, inhibition, satiation, salience, and the rest. No hitherto unknown facts are discovered by extrasensory perception, nor are there any parametric laws that define how much extrasensory perception you will get if you alter some fundamental psi variable. There are indeed, as I have already hinted, some laws of normal psychology which say something about whether we will be able to *use* the vehicle or medium in which psi inheres. These are ordinary psychological laws, and they do indeed need to be thoroughly studied. The laws that are of primary importance to parapsychology are the laws which connect up these actually basic psychological laws with the character of the vehicle or medium through which the paranormal is expressed. I think we begin to see the beginnings of laws of this sort. They are like holes, cuts, gaps through which something slips; or, if I may quote Shelley's extraordinary figure of speech when he refers to the moon shining through the clouds and reflecting itself, along with the stars, in the clear waters beneath:

"... The calm rivers, lakes and seas,
Like strips of the sky fallen through on high,
Are each paved with the moon and these."

(The Cloud)

The sudden phantasm, the extraordinary streak of success in an ESP experiment, the bizarre poltergeist, the incredible correctly perceived precognitive impression—all these appear in moments when we tear loose from the ordinary framework of our time-space organization of knowledge and see things as if through a hole or

slit, utilizing the medium through which psi makes itself known. Perhaps this is like an electron changing its place, liberating energy, or perhaps this is just our modern fantasy.

I am going to attempt here a graphic image of the ordinary time-space schema which I have set up in the form of a transparent hollow cube (Figure 1). Imagine that ordinarily we move along

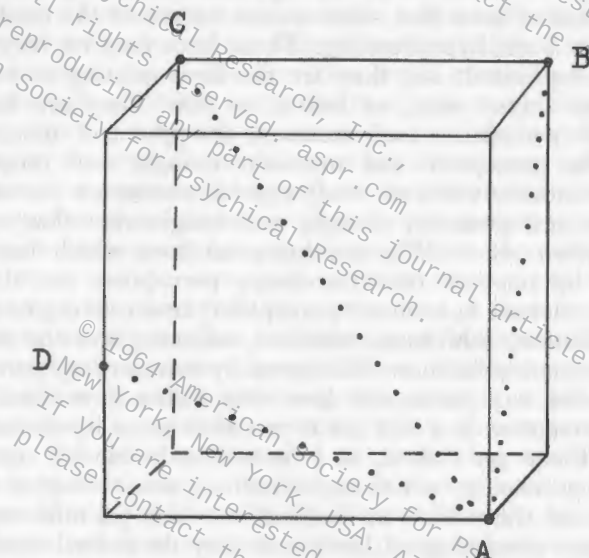


Fig. 1. Time-space schema in the form of a transparent cube.

the surface, but not within, and not outside of this cube. Imagine the time-space relations as binding us to travel or make communication only along the six surfaces of this cube. I suggest that all the space within this hollow cube allows straight lines to be drawn from one point to another, which is possible, hypothetically, just because the cube is hollow, and the lines visible just because it is transparent. From this viewpoint, I suggest that getting from A to B, or from B to C, or to any other determined point on the surface of the cube, is similar to the ordinary sensory contacts that we make with other events at other points in space or time; but I also suggest that there are, as we envisage the possibility, other ways of getting from one point to another, other ways of transcending the time-space problem. I suggest that the paranormal may force us to consider communication within and outside of the cube, types of communication not limited to the six surfaces already indicated. Indeed, any point on the outside is connected with any point on the inside, or on an opposite face, or wherever

you like. I am saying that the medium through which such information is conveyed may be a medium alien to the ordinary concepts of time and space. There are psychological affinities, motives, and so on, which allow one to take off, so to speak, from any given point on the surface of the cube and to make one's way through, by one course or another, to a different point on, or within, the cube. You don't get new information this way; you get the same information in another way. If I am reminded here that in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patanjali (8), and in theosophical law generally, there are similar ideas, I can only reply, in the words of Montaigne, that "I gathered a posy of other men's flowers, but the thread that binds them is my own."

My suggestion, then, is that there is a profound reality to which parapsychology points: the reality of a modality or vehicle or medium through which the events of human personality are enabled to make contact with other events in the human personality, or with a material universe, past, present, or future. I am asking you to imagine a timeless and spaceless sea in which communication—perhaps like waves with their infinitely varying undulations—may make its way. I am saying that psychical research is the study of the process of this communication between person and person, or between person and object; or perhaps, indeed, between person and cosmic realities which we cannot, at present, describe at all. I suggest that as our knowledge grows, it will replace our present pathetically thin and empty conceptions of this vehicle or modality by richer and more complicated media of many sorts. I think that the next step will be merely the first in a series of infinitely rich and complex steps which must be taken.

You will see, then, why I conclude that there is a kind of reality underlying psychic phenomena which is a substantive reality, a reality regarding a medium of communication. But it is not a content reality; that is, it does not give us any specific information other than that which we would ordinarily achieve through the usual sensory means. I am, at the same time, suggesting that the investigation of this medium must start with normal psychology, and the conditions under which normal psychology enables us to trap and investigate the peculiar qualities which make, so to speak, special kinds of transmission possible; like the "wrinkles" (or the "rubber-blanket" effects) which may occur in this inner medium; or may make clear what kind of waves, or crossflows of different kinds of waves, it is permitting at the time. I conclude, therefore, that a law of psychic phenomena involving specific processes of telepathic or clairvoyant contact with specific persons and objects does not exist and does not need to be invented. I am saying,

on the other hand, that there is, in place of a law, a vehicle of communication, a modality or a substance in and through which the paranormal can move.

III

But were Hudson and Myers right in emphasizing the subconscious and the dream, believing that they offered a royal road to the paranormal? For a long time I was tempted to stress the vast significance opening up today in the paranormal through the study of drowsiness, sleeping, and dreaming. Almost everywhere the psychoanalytic studies of the dream process, as, for example in the work of Charles Fisher (2), have been merging usefully with studies of the broad physiology and psychology of the dream state. It may be that the real clue to the paranormal lies in a sort of dream-like perceiving, a kind of perceptual activity which is like that which is revealed in dreaming. Indeed, in the deep-level "latent" dream which Freud describes, in the "dream-work," and in the "manifest dream" which we remember and recount, it may be that all these levels of the dream process are related to realities occurring in the modality or vehicle which I have been describing; and that the paranormal will begin to open up rapidly as the dream process is more fully understood. But the reason why I hesitate to describe the paranormal primarily in terms of the dream is because many flashes of brilliant paranormal power occur in a state of wide-awake awareness. We do not know the boundaries of the dream, and it does not help to squeeze the term "dream" to cover all sorts of phenomena which we do not understand. I would say, rather, that the dream process offers enormous promise for understanding the way in which the individual gets out of the empty cube I have described and makes his way to one or another point elsewhere on its surface, or beyond. Perhaps dreaming is one of the lines, so to speak, which carries us from one such point to another on the cube, and as such it will have enormous emphasis. But this is not quite the same thing as saying that dream perceiving and paranormal perceiving go hand and glove. They are rather like different notation systems which in some respects can be translated back and forth and in some respects cannot.

IV

Thus far, I have been talking about the so-called "mental phenomena" of psychical research: telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, retrocognition, and a few other processes which have a clairvoyant-like flavor. They have at times been called *psi*

gamma (10), *gamma* being the first letter of the Greek word that means "to know." These phenomena are essentially forms of knowing. In addition to these, there are the processes having to do with movement or action, such as psychokinesis, paranormal sounds, lights, etc., apparently arising from definite physical conditions. They have been called *psi kappa* (10), from the initial letter of the Greek word which means "to move." At first sight, it may appear that I have been concerned only with *psi gamma*, the clairvoyant-like type of knowing. The fact is, however, that we often seem to be dealing with a reciprocity between the ordinary common ways of interacting, and that the *gamma* processes, so to speak, are not as independent as they seem. There is even some suggestive evidence that certain special conditions, rare but important, like poltergeists or highly developed physical mediumship or a thundering spontaneous case involving both clear knowledge and a vigorous intervention in the ordinary world, may comprise both *psi gamma* and *psi kappa* elements, and therefore may involve some fundamental condition which underlies them both. In the midst of our speculations it may, then, be appropriate to conceive of the vehicle or modality which I am describing as the basis for *psi gamma* and likewise as the basis for *psi kappa*; just as the same water or air may be the medium which received and the medium which conveyed the message within the hollow tube which I have earlier mentioned. It may be possible to conceive of transmissions of energies which result in physical events so that the same modality carries, so to speak, both *gamma* and *kappa* events, both clairvoyance and psychokinesis; or that some more fundamental kind of process can potentiate both of them and make them both likely to occur. But this mode of speculation belongs with the flights of evolutionary fancy which you find in the Roman poet Lucretius, which in several startling respects have proved in our modern age to have been correct. This does not mean that all of Lucretius is correct, but I should be very proud if, out of twenty speculations, one of mine should be a tenth as good as the worst of those proposed by Lucretius.

V

Now, if it be asked how speculations of this sort can actually lead into research, let me remind you that speculations as to the modality or vehicle which carried sound made an important impact in the magnificent experimental contributions of Hermann von Helmholtz in his investigation of the sensations of tone in relation to the history of music. The discussion of the modality which carries light was already a controversial issue in the days

of Sir Isaac Newton and the Dutch physicist Huygens in the seventeenth century, and has played an important part through the whole history of the study of light and electromagnetism. Speculations ultimately do lead into specific concrete steps of investigation. I believe, in fact, that one great trouble with psychical research is that we don't have well worked out theories of vehicles or modalities which can be taken seriously enough to lead into experiments. I would like to suggest a few directions in which experimental work might be developed from these thoughts.

First, we might imagine that there are in fact different kinds of modalities, and that the classification or taxonomy of psi gamma or psi kappa events may ultimately suggest actual quantitative relations between different kinds of vehicles. I am not so far here from what Evelyn Hutchinson (4) suggested at the last meeting of the Parapsychological Association: the need for mathematical models appropriate to different classes of paranormal events. Secondly, there may be certain life events having to do with fatigue, sleep, dreams, possibly toxic or other biochemically altered states which shake us loose, so to speak, from the modalities in which we ordinarily function and set us free to function in these other uncommon modalities. The laws governing them would still be the laws of normal science, not of parapsychology; but such laws would show us when to give attention to the properties of certain modalities and exploit them, and when to turn to others. Third, and most important, in connection with the little gaps, or tears, or holes which I have suggested may occur in the normal substance which underlies our everyday behavioral actions, there may be a glimpse into the paranormal vehicle in the study of these special conditions, these rare and bizarre conditions which allow something very extraordinary to occur, we may actually get our fingers in the hole, pull it wide, and derive more direct perception of the properties of the vehicle itself.

VI

We are constantly being pushed today to say one way or the other whether paranormal phenomena have a physical basis, or what the relation is between physical laws and paranormal laws. People are restless because we cannot give clear answers. The trouble is that the term "physical" is itself quite slippery nowadays, and the term "paranormal" is equally so. It may well be that certain types of paranormal phenomena directly express what we call physical realities, while others only express them indirectly; and, indeed, some may express realities which are very different from those which we today call physical. It is quite likely that

the paranormal expresses laws which will ultimately emerge from modern physics; but this physics will prove to be very different from the physics of today, just as the physics of today is very different from the physics of Newton's time. I am afraid that saying there must be a physical interpretation of the paranormal is simply a gentle evasion of a knotty problem. I am not saying that the paranormal is unrelated to physical realities—this would be absurd. But we can say that there are relatively few of the physical realities of today which we know how to apply in parapsychology. It remains for us to do what we can, gathering data at all levels—the physical level, the psychological level, the psychosocial level, and certainly the paranormal level—and looking openmindedly for connections.

I draw, therefore, five conclusions:

1. There is no "law of psychic phenomena" as such.
2. There is a vehicle for paranormal impressions and communications, a vehicle which we must investigate systematically.
3. In the meantime, there are laws of normal psychology, laws which we are investigating and beginning to understand, and which occasionally lead us closer to the paranormal.
4. These psychological laws are beginning to throw light in a spasmodic and irregular way on the nature of the vehicle for psychic communication.
5. The attempt to find a road to a "law of psychic phenomena" therefore leads back to the investigation of scattered empirical principles which may seem capricious because we have prematurely looked for abstractions rather than for verifiable working hypotheses. It is not caprice, but lawfulness that we encounter. But the laws are ordinary psychological laws functioning in a time and space which we do not understand.

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Obituary: Dr. Nandor Fodor

We regret to record the sudden death of Dr. Nandor Fodor, psychoanalyst and psychical researcher, on May 17, 1964. He was born in Hungary in 1895 and received the LL.D. degree from the Royal Hungarian University of Science in 1917.

Dr. Fodor was a member of the A.S.P.R. and had contributed many articles to the *Journal*; his final contribution, a note on his experiences with the graphology of Rafael Schermann, was published in the July, 1964, issue. He was the Society's London correspondent from 1936 to 1939, at which time he became a permanent resident of New York, and his "Letter from London" appeared regularly in the *Journal* during those years.

Dr. Fodor was the author of many widely-read books in the field of psychical research, among them *The Encyclopedia of Psychic Science* (1934), *These Mysterious People* (1936), *On the Trail of the Poltergeist* (1958), *The Haunted Mind* (1960), and *Mind Over Space* (1962). At the time of his death, he had recently completed work on a book dealing with Freud's early years, *The Voice Within*. His immediate survivors are his widow, a daughter, and a granddaughter.