Consciousness and Psi: The *First Sight* Model

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My topic is the importance of psi in the understanding of consciousness. I am going to sketch for you a model that I have developed that proposes that psi (including extrasensory perception and psychokinesis) is an essential constituent of consciousness, that it is in fact *the primary element* in the network of processes that produce consciousness. Whereas psi has sometimes been referred to as "second sight," I think that it might best be understood as "first sight."

A model is an analogy, and the basic analogy I am proposing is this: let us suppose that extrasensory perception is like subliminal perception.

I want to ask you to imagine some things. First, imagine that consciousness, for every organism, is continuously being generated by processes that are not in themselves conscious. In this sense, consciousness is something like a lit electric bulb. Flip the switch and the bulb lights up. We do not see the large network of processes that are producing this light – the wires, the electric current, the generators, the relays and alternators. – but we know that all these things stand behind the lit bulb, a dark but active surround outside the pool of light. Let us imagine that similar active surrounds of unseen processes stand behind our bright pools of consciousness.

This is a common assumption for scientists attempting to study consciousness, but imagine another wrinkle to this surround that is not generally added. Imagine that this these preconscious processes are not merely made up of impersonal physical events going on in brains and nervous systems but that they are really as personal and purposeful and individual as consciousness itself. There is much good evidence for this, but it is an assumption that scientists are usually reluctant to make. However, this model will be most sensible if we do not assume that consciousness is mechanically generated. Preconscious processes are as much characterized by personal meaning and intention as consciousness is. They must be understood psychologically as well as physically.

Now imagine that among all the needs and values and wishes that we all variously hold, we also hold one wish in common at this preconscious level. We wish to present to consciousness the very most useful thing as personally conceived at every moment. This is what we may say these preconscious processes are "for." They guide consciousness to the one most useful thing as quickly and efficiently as possible in this moment, and the next, and the next. Our model holds that preconscious processes scan, sort, select and guide the formation of each flowing bit of conscious experience. What is the material that they work upon in these ways? All of the things that are potentially conscious at any time, and that more or less vie for our attention. These include purely personal things

like memories and wishes and visceral experiences, and extra-personal things like sensations impinging upon our nervous systems, and – and here is the parapsychological part – also elements from the vastly expanded realm of possible meaning drawn from a greatly extended universe not immediately local to the individual. And this is the last thing that this model asks you to imagine. Imagine that this personal surround of pre-conscious material is not limited to what has already been experienced by the individual, nor to potential information immediately impinging upon the nervous system, but also includes an extended universe of unknown boundaries. It is in scanning, sorting and selecting from among this vast extent of material that the formation of all experience begins, according to our model.

Remember that "psi" is our general term for referring to all of our interactions with reality beyond those that are immediately local. Note that this model implies that psi in its most basic, normal functioning, is not the occasional, furtive and unreliable thing that we usually think of it as being. Nor is it in any way exotic. Rather, we are presuming that it is continuously active, essentially important, powerfully reliable, and almost thoroughly unconscious.

Let me say some more about preconscious processing, particularly subliminal perception.

Unconscious influences upon consciousness have been studied by psychologists since early in the 20th century, when Jastrow (in cognitive psychology) and Freud (in psychiatry) reported that both our perceptions and our emotional adjustments were swayed by influences outside of consciousness. These lines of study have proceeded since, and out of it all has emerged a picture of the mind as being a zone of conscious self-awareness with a preconscious surround that precedes and conditions consciousness in complex but systematic ways. The findings of parapsychology are not incongruent with this picture, but they add to it the idea that an organism's engagement with this surround is not bounded by physical, sensory impingement but extends beyond that in space and in time.

Is it reasonable to suppose that an organism is not rigidly bounded but at its edges blurs into its surround, such that the two are not entirely distinguishable? This is obviously the case in a physical sense. The fruit on my plate at breakfast time is well on the way to becoming part of myself a couple of hours later. In the words of the children's rhyme: "It's a very odd thing, as odd as can be, that whatever Miss Gee eats, becomes part of Miss Gee." In another example of blurry physical boundaries, consider the gecko, a lizard remarkable for its ability to walk upside down on ceilings. Research has discovered that its defiance of gravity is permitted by the fact that the extremely fine hairs on its feet provide such a density of contact with a surface that it creates billions of weak molecular attractions called van der Waals forces. These forces act only at very small distances and hold together the molecules of objects. In other words, the same tiny forces that hold the gecko together and hold the ceiling together, also hold the gecko to the ceiling. At this very fine level of contact, gecko and ceiling are energically merged. I suggest that there is an analogous blur at the edge of our mental being. At the leading

edge of perception and intention, organism and surround lack distinguishable identity. In this transactional zone, they *are* one another. It really might be best to say that in this zone they *become themselves out of each other.*

Were it not for the anomalies of parapsychology, we might not need to pose the idea that, by our nature, we extend beyond ourselves in apprehension and action. Given the reality of those anomalies, this idea seems almost inescapable.

Subliminal Perception

Some decades ago, a popular book called *The Hidden Persuaders* fascinated and alarmed the American public with its announcement that the advertising industry was manipulating our judgments and decisions using unseen, subliminal influences. In the prototypical example, inserting words like "you are hungry for popcorn" between the frames of movies resulted in boosted popcorn sales even though the words were never consciously perceived. These ideas were controversial for academic psychologists, but since then the phenomena have continued to be studied, refined and used, and we are now assaulted daily with sophisticated applications by interests that want to sway our purchases or our votes. Now they are so widely accepted by most of experimental psychology, that they are used as techniques to study other processes, such as learning, attitude formation, and emotional response. Is this vulnerability to unconscious influence some quirk that has been perversely inserted into our nature solely for the benefit of marketers and politicians? On the contrary, it appears that preconscious, subliminal influences are an ongoing part of the developmental history of each bit of our experience.

Each bit of experience goes through a rapid history of development, which begins with unconscious processes. In the case of a single perception, I am aware of seeing something and being able to think about it. This piece of awareness is an end-product. Just prior to my seeing the thing as such, I experienced a collection of sensations that I attempt to construe. Just prior to that, sensations registered subliminally upon my nervous system. And just prior to that, an extrasensory anticipation of the event initiated the perceptual process.

A great deal of the work of experimental psychology has focused on the stage just prior to conscious experience, when meaning is being attributed to inchoate experiences. Psychologists studying subliminal perception, added their preconscious step to the cognitive account. The findings of parapsychologists add the step of extrasensory anticipation.

In the genesis of a perception, each of these steps sends a rapid message to the next and orients it in a helpful way. Rational consciousness is a marvelous, very powerful tool, responsible for our dominance of the planet, and each of us is constantly selecting the most interesting issue to present to it from the myriad of potential concerns that exist in the present or the personally meaningful future.

We are making one extraordinary assumption: that at the psi level, we are in touch with virtually everything, or at least so much that we currently have no way to assess its boundaries. *The psi step must begin the winnowing process from virtually everything to one best thing*. This initial step of selection and de-selection is the basic Psi process. In everyday experience it is "bound" and functions entirely unconsciously, although it goes on constantly and must operate in what seems to the rational mind an unbelievably complex and intricate way. In making this selection, it must use two criteria: How important is the potential event? How likely is it to actually occur to me? These two criteria together might be said to constitute the event's *sensed relevance*.

With this mammoth task of selecting and de-selecting in terms of sensed relevance, the Psi function has only one binary tool: it is to orient toward the thing or away from it to something else instead.

When a pre-consciously apprehended piece of sensory information is selected as salient, this selection initiates an activation of preconscious emotional and cognitive responses. This activation does not by itself result in a conscious experience, but in the arousal of an *apprehensive network* that facilitates experience. This network poses a set of implicit questions that preconscious attention seeks to answer by consulting additional sensory information. With it the person poses tentative, general, preverbal hypotheses in terms of which to scan for confirmatory evidence. Thereby, it guides the effort to construe. Preconscious processes, including psi, anticipate and implicitly structure the formation of experience.. It is sensory experience that provides conscious awareness. It provides the validating information to the anticipational questions. Psi is part of the preparatory process which helps the mind make the best use of its sensory experience. In the ordinary flow of developing awarenesses, the anticipational questions slip into oblivion before they can ever become issues to awareness, in favor of the actual developing experience.

Suppose I notice a flicker of movement on my right, just at the edge of my visual field. I turn my head and see that someone has entered the room. This model proposes that before the flicker of light, a psi apprehension suggested that something meaningful was forthcoming and my awareness was alerted in a general direction and to a cluster of potential meanings. The flicker, as we know from work in subliminal perception, itself arouses an anticipational network of potential meaning, beginning to question the movement and preparing me to understand it. When I turn and see a person, I have full visual information which I can quickly understand, and I have a simple awareness, a bit of knowing. All the rapid processes of pre-knowing have vanished before I can glimpse them or know of their participation in my experience.

What happens if this development is interrupted before the natural, rapid flow of events can reach the formation of a perception? Both parapsychologists and the psychologists studying PWA have been asking this question, and have independently found many of the same answers. Basically, the orienting action of the earliest stages can be glimpsed in the feelings, thoughts and behavior of the person whose perception is being denied. When conscious perception is allowed to develop, this is what is available

to awareness. When that is blocked by not allowing sufficient sensory exposure, one may see the anticipational arousal expressed *inadvertently* in the feelings or associations or behavior of the person, with the latter having no insight into the origin of those things.

In general, both psi apprehension and subliminal apprehension can be seen primarily by interpreting inadvertency. Ordinarily, consciousness is oblivious to them, but when conscious experience is prevented, we can glimpse the hints and whispers of implicit meaning.

Inadvertent psychological events are those that seem to "just happen" as opposed to being experienced as things "I do." An image comes to mind, the memory of a song occurs of its own volition, a mood descends or arises, a silly mispronunciation intrudes into speech, one name is substituted for another, a shadow is misinterpreted as a snake, or in the depth of sleep a dream takes shape. In the context of an ESP experiment, the percipient utters free associations, the remote viewer scribbles and consults an inner flow of images, the card-guesser impulsively throws a card on one pile among five, the subject being stared at by someone out of sight generates unfelt neurophysiological responses being sent to a polygraph.

Although presumably active all the time, we rarely see the extrasensory and the subliminal-sensory levels of experience in action. I have an occasional experience in which I can see the subliminal at work in my own stream of consciousness. Since I have become a little hard of hearing, my threshold for clearly hearing vocal speech is a little different from that of most people. Recently in a family conversation, I uttered some thought only to see my daughter roll her eyes in an expression that gently said "he's doing it again." I had expressed a restatement of something that someone else in the conversation had said a short time before. I had not been conscious of the remark, but others were. To me, my own words popped into my head as a brand new idea, but others recognized them as a close association to the words that had come before. This sort of "popping up" is an example of the sort of inadvertency that expresses a subliminal influence without awareness.

Inadvertent expressions of preconscious processes have been studied extensively by psychologists. Poetzel found that images flashed briefly and not consciously seen were expressed metaphorically later in dreams. Cognitive psychologists found that subliminal stimuli affected later processes of learning, forgetting, affective response and association if the later material was connected somehow to the unconscious stimuli. Psychodynamic and social psychologists found that the emotional significance of subliminal material effected a person’s later mood and attitude and spontaneous social behavior.

In a parallel manner, parapsychologists found that people could indeed not see the material enclosed in opaque envelopes, but they could sometimes successfully guess them, and perhaps to a higher degree, could express a meaningful inadvertent response to the hidden content by their physiological responses, or spontaneous imagery, or affective responses to similar content exposed later. Many other examples could be listed of the various pre-sensory and subliminal-sensory effects that have been studied. For instance, in a ganzfeld ESP study, the percipient allows the development of spontaneous feelings

and images which are not consciously experienced as being caused by the target material (which is neither seen nor heard). However, later examination of the target material often suggests associative connections to the feelings and images, to the extent that the experiences can be correctly identified as associated.

Many similar patterns have been found between subliminal and extrasensory perception. Similar conditions facilitate them, such as drawing responses vs. verbalizing them, sensory attenuation, hypnosis, free association, dreaming sleep, relaxed reverie, and a positive, encouraging environment. Similar sorts of people have been seen to be more likely to show the effects: people with stronger tendencies toward dissociation or creativity or absorption, those positively disposed toward it, those who are more socially engaged and those who are less anxious. The expression of both kinds of stimuli tend to be fragmented and metaphorical, rather than literal and complete. Both may more commonly be expressed by indirect effects on emotion or attention or on some aspect of psycho-physiological functioning, than by direct cognitive retrieval. Situations requiring careful assessment and judgment tend to make both kinds of effects vanish. Finally, several correlational studies have reported that persons who are better at retrieving subliminal information are also better at retrieving extrasensory information. Putting all of this together, it appears that scientists in these different fields have been studying similar things without realizing it.

It may seem common sense to us that the gap between a very faint stimulus and no stimulus at all is absolute and enormous. However, evidence suggests that the gap may be very slight in many ways, or even non-existent.

My model holds that the mind utilizes its available extrasensory and subliminal-sensory material in highly similar ways. I call this a *hypothesis of functional equivalence.*

Psi-Missing

Any serious model of psi must contend with the reality of psi-missing, the significant negative scoring that is sometimes found in ESP experiments. Since we are assuming that psi does function persistently and unconsciously, we must ask of what benefit might be the tendency to turn away-from some potential event? The most obvious answer is that the winnowing function that I just mentioned, requires that all potential meanings but one be turned away-from at the initial preconscious level, in order to bring upon the stage of awareness the one most useful thing at that moment. If something elected to be an ESP target does not pass this test of "probably most useful" in a given instant, it will pass on only a sense of avoidance in favor of the other thing being selected instead. But significant psi-missing requires a *persistent* avoidance of the meaning of some event. Why would we maintain a posture of avoiding a particular thing long enough to produce a significantly negative deviation in an ESP experiment? Parapsychologists have viewed these results as unconscious errors but this is probably too narrow a view Imagine an early ancestor of yours walking through dense woods. On her right is a safe passage which she cannot clearly see, on her left is a dangerous predator crouching behind a bush. She cannot see the predator but she psychically

engages its presence. The best action, the one which leads her to live long enough to become your ancestor, is to very quickly become interested in something to her right and head that way. Suppose the psychic apprehension instead alerted her to "some sort of trouble on the left?" It might cause her to pause an instant and take too long a look at the dangerous bush. Immediate avoidance by simply preferring an alternative to the danger is the healthiest choice. If this counter-preference was observed in an ESP test, it would be expressed as a psi-miss.

There is an interesting analogy to this in the literature on the effect of subliminal primes on social judgment. It is known that sometimes a prime results in the facilitation of a perception or attribution (i.e. the content of a prime becomes more likely to be expressed in a judgment) whereas sometimes it results in a reduction in the likelihood of the expression of the prime. The former, called "assimilation," is associated with primes that are highly relevant to the target, while the second, called "contrast," is found when primes are highly irrelevant to the target. Assimilation and contrast are for subliminal primes what psi-hitting and psi-missing are for extrasensory information. The mind is apparently capable of pre-consciously assessing the relevance of material that is either subliminal or extrasensory, using relevant material and turning away from irrelevant material.

There is much more that I could say by way of introducing this model. If you are interested, I refer you to two papers which I have published in recent issues of the *Journal of Parapsychology*. There I develop the model much further, with more to say about different expressions of psi, and many other matters. I also survey a sizable portion of the published parapsychological literature in terms of the model's expectations. I believe that the model shows the capacity to bring much order and meaning to our otherwise confusing literature.

Let me briefly give you an idea of the kind of research we are doing at the Rhine Center that is guided by this model. The first such study I carried out was conceived before I had developed the model so fully. I was intrigued by subliminal perception research that showed that subliminal primes could affect spontaneous social behavior. I reasoned that ESP must be expressed similarly. I formed a small group that agreed to function in a quasi-therapeutic, support group manner, while an ESP target was being selected randomly by a computer in another place. Although we could not know the nature of the day's target, we all knew that an ESP target was being picked, and hoped that it might show itself inadvertently in our group process – in the topics, moods, and various surprising events that an unstructured group can often produce – but we did not give much thought to the target as we went along, discussing whatever we wished however we wished. At each session's end we rated our day's process on several dimensions, and then learned a number which let us draw a set of four pictures. One was the target, but we did not know which. We spread the pictures out and rated each of them for their degree of correspondence with the session we had just experienced. Only after all these ratings were completed and collected did we learn which of the 4 was the actual target that the computer had picked. We averaged the ratings given to each picture to see to what extent we had been able to identify the correct target vs. the controls by comparing its content to our session. This group met off and on for several years, and amassed 375 sessions. We found that the target did make itself known in our behavior

well enough for us to identify it much more often than chance should allow. Even of more interest, the kind of session we had experienced determined when sessions would hit and when they would miss. Our model would lead us to expect that sessions that were characterized by intense focus and cognitive work should lead to misses more than hits, since the group's work would lead the target to seem extraneous and therefore excluded from expression. This is what we found,. Sessions that were especially characterized by intense revelations and heavy emotional work produced psi-misses while the remaining sessions produced very high psi-hitting. These are patterns that one would expect to find in the expression of a subliminal stimulus, and we found them with an extrasensory target.

In more recent research we have been trying to learn more about how psi and other pre-conscious processes, such as subliminal primes and creative impulses, work together in producing our experiences. One project that has recently been completed involved an attempt to heighten certain moods and attitudes that we have found to be psi conducive and creativity-conducive, using subliminal and incidental primes. Two more projects are beginning soon, in which we will examine the effect of a different subliminal prime upon both extrasensory scoring and a familiar subliminal effect. We will then explore the question of whether or not the same prime, presented only to an extrasensory agent, will have the same effect as a subliminal exposure. There are many more questions along these lines that we plan to address as time and resources permit.

CONCLUSION

This model suggests how psi may function in everyday life. Yet suppose that it is true that psi influences act continually and implicitly in the formation of our experience, and mingle meaningfully with other preconscious processes. Is this only of academic interest?

I think not. Besides the fascinating unseen dimensions that this adds to our understanding of our nature, there may be very practical implications as well. Consider this analogy. As you stand outside on a clear night and look at the starry sky with the unaided eye, you will not see the rings of Saturn. Add the proper telescope and the rings pop into view. Yet the telescope does not add one photon of light coming from Saturn to your retina. The telescope only bends and selects the photons that are available in such a way that they are not overwhelmed by others. Those same photons are available without the telescope, but they cannot be seen as such. Why not? Our visual system has evolved in a very sensible way from a survival perspective. Seeing things as far away as the rings of Saturn has had negligible survival value in our racial history. It is very practical that they not intrude upon our visual experience. Yet if for some reason we wish to see the rings of Saturn, we can apply our knowledge of the laws of optics and refract the light in such a way that the light from nearer things is excluded and the rings can be discerned. We understand the laws of optics much better than we understand the laws of preconscious processes, including psi. They await our discovery. Dramatic psychic experiences suggest that important flashes of knowledge can emerge from the implicit sea of unconscious extrasensory engagement. As interesting as these occasions are, it is

worth remembering that they are still almost entirely unaided by science. When the laws of preconscious processes are as well understood as the laws of optics, our access to knowledge, in whatever directions we wish, may be vastly extended.