



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH, INC.

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# THE A.I.P.R. NEWS

## Would Free Will be a Paranormal Phenomenon?

by Michael A. Thalbourne

### Inside this issue:

**Would Free Will be a Paranormal Phenomenon?** by Michael A. Thalbourne (pp. 1-2). In honour of the late Dr. Michael A. Thalbourne, who passed away May 4th, 2010, we feature a short article on free will from his pen. Michael was a highly regarded psychologist and parapsychologist, but he was noted for often commenting on the philosophical aspects (e.g., the mind/brain problem) pertaining to parapsychological issues. His article considers free will as a form of psi.

**Commentary on Thalbourne's "Free Will"** by Colin Mitchell (pp. 2-3) Colin Mitchell contributes a commentary on Michael's 'Free Will' article. Colin clarifies some issues not addressed by Michael.

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I am going to open this discussion by giving my conclusion: I believe that under at least one interpretation the phrase "free will" does imply a paranormal phenomenon, but not under other interpretations. It depends. How I arrive at that conclusion is as follows.

In a previous article (Thalbourne, 2009), I discussed consciousness and the relevance to it of psi phenomena. I described the Physicalist view of consciousness, where mentality is seen as identical with certain states in the body, most notably in the brain. It seems to me that if there is no room for mind as a separate, animating principle, then human beings can be considered to be nothing more than (extraordinarily complex) robots, or physicochemical machines. This is distasteful to many people (even some Physicalists when they think about it), who point out that unlike lumps of brute matter human beings are conscious—they feel and think. But consciousness is nothing other than brain processes, which operate according to electrochemical laws, so we return to the mechanistic view of the human being. The human being may not have wires and a metal casing, but is a machine nevertheless, though we feel (perhaps in a misplaced way) a sense of ethical responsibility towards him or her, unlike towards our computers.

Indeed, it may be asked, what essential difference is there between matter which is living and matter which is dead—between life and death?

If we are physicochemical machines (and it doesn't help to say we are biological machines) then our operations are entirely determined by the laws of physics. It is a basic limiting principle that all events have causes that precede them, so, it follows, all consciousness events have causes which precede them, and they in turn have causes which preceded them also: Physicalism seems

### “the phrase “free will” does imply a paranormal phenomenon”

to imply causal determinism. It thus also seems to follow that my actions have causes that preceded them, and, ultimately, causes that are beyond my control. It therefore appears to follow that determinism precludes the existence of genuine free will. We are not only machines; we are machines that are not ultimately free to act but are bound by our causal past.

There is a view of free will that attempts to get around this difficulty. While conceding that determinism is true, it says that we are free to act when we *choose* to act. I was free to go down to the shops to buy some milk because I *chose* to do so, but when the intruder tied me up and robbed me of my television set I was not free to stop

him because I was bound and consequently had no choice. There is no denying that our choices are determined by events that went before them, but even so, choice is all that we mean by free will. It is paradoxical: speaking prospectively, it seems that we have a choice between X and Y; speaking retrospectively, it was determined that one of these choices would be made, the other not. This viewpoint is known as the compatibilist school of thought: determinism is true but free will is compatible with it. Moral education has to do with inculcating the making of right choices, however “right” is conceived.

Thus far there is nothing paranormal about the compatibilist view of free will or the strict determinist's view that free will is ultimately illusory. We come, then, to the viewpoint that free will does exist and that we mean more than what the compatibilist claims we do by “choice”. This is known as the contra-causal account. For while some choices may come easy to us, e.g., to have some chocolate, others may be much more difficult: we are aware in ourselves that the tendency of our action is to go one way, while perhaps “our better lights” are urging us to resist and go in another direction, as for example a would-be reformed alco-

(Continued on page 2)

## At My Desk

Subscribers to the AIPR's *Australian Journal of Parapsychology* will have read the sad news of the passing of Dr. Michael A. Thalbourne on May 14, 2010. The June issue of the journal was dedicated to Michael, and we featured two articles by Michael in that issue (note too that I've given Michael a feature spot in this issue of *The A.I.P.R. News*). It is especially unfortunate that Michael passed away so suddenly because I had only just got back from Portugal where I attended the 8th Bial Foundation Symposium, and I had hoped to catch up with him in person to relate the events that transpired over there. He would have appreciated the gossip about his long-time colleagues from the UK, Europe, the US, and elsewhere, most of whom he hadn't seen in years. While I can't share that privileged information with readers, I will say that the symposium was considered by many, including yours truly, to be highly coherent and well-conceived. This is because speakers from both the psychophysiological and parapsychological camps were not talking at cross-purposes with each other, but instead gave talks that were intellectually accessible to all and sundry. The theme was "Intuition and Decision-Making", and speakers included renowned psychologist David Myers, and parapsychologists Dick Bierman, Richard Broughton, and Marilyn Schlitz. Myers warned us about the traps of intuition; Bierman spoke on the anomalous component of intuition; Broughton covered the evolutionary aspects of intuition; and Schlitz talked about bridging science and popular culture. Feeling as I do, that I am often isolated in Australia, being so far from Europe and the United States, I can't stress enough how important it is to make physical contact with my colleagues overseas, and the Bial Symposia are one of the best ways of doing that. *Viva BIAL!*

\* \* \*

Got something to say about parapsychology or the paranormal? Submit your contribution to:

Dr. Lance Storm,  
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or e-mail me at:

aiprinc@yahoo.com

Enjoy this edition of *The A.I.P.R. News!*

—Lance Storm

## Would Free Will be a Paranormal Phenomenon? (cont'd from page 1)

holic being faced with the temptation of a beer. Sometimes we have to make an effort, and introspectively speaking, an effort is, apparently, going against the tide of causation—*contra causas*. The determinist/Physicalist might say that, at the end of the day, one set of brain processes simply "overrode", "controlled", "took precedence over" another set of habitual tendencies—an executive function superimposed itself upon usual functions—but, and if the outcome was "predetermined", why did the person have to make such a great effort to overcome his or her natural tendencies? We often assign moral praise to the making of effort. But what is the moral praise to be assigned to the making of effort when the person is "ultimately" not in control of their actions? (Correctly speaking, this

question applies to *all* actions.)

Whether free will actually exists in this sense is perhaps beside the point. We have been concerned to give a realistic account of what we *mean* by "free will". And the contracausalist account is that *per impossibile*, the person sometimes acts *against* the causal influences that are impinging upon him or her and

### "Paranormal phenomena are characterised by 'illicit' causal relations"

initiates a course of action that is truly free. We choose, but in some real sense our choice is unconstrained. This intuition may be an illusion, but it is a compelling one, and is what I would suggest is actually meant by "free will" in everyday life. To be sure, our actions can be compromised, mental illness being a conspicu-

ous example of a condition which, in our society, we see as sometimes leading to unfree action.

Paranormal phenomena are characterised by "illicit" causal relations: events are conceived of as affecting one another in ways that are contrary to assumptions made by conventional science.

*If* contracausal freedom exists it might therefore, likewise, qualify as a **paranormal**

phenomenon, since it implies a break in the causal continuity that is assumed to hold in the rest of the universe. ♣

Notes:

1. M. A. Thalbourne, "Some Notes on Consciousness and Claims of Psi," *Paranormal Review* 51 (2009): 21-22.

## Commentary on Thalbourne's "Free Will" by Colin Mitchell

Michael asks what is the essential difference between matter which is living and matter which is dead? The answer from modern science is that there is no non-physical 'essence' which distinguishes living from non-living matter, just a gradual gradation from matter, which we *label* as 'non-living', to matter which we *label* as 'living'. Likewise, as Michael points out, modern science regards the mind and consciousness as identical with physical processes in the brain. Physics eschews the concept of a dualism of the physical and the non-physical.

Non-dualism has a strong bearing on the "contracausal account" of free will discussed by Michael. He speculates that if free will is *truly* contracausal (i.e., it violates deterministic physical causality) then it would qualify as "paranormal". What is not spelled out in his article is that to qualify for this contracausal interpretation of free will (which is the normal intuitive understanding of free will) there needs to be a separate agent we call "I" which *causes* the act of free will. In other words it

requires the existence of something beyond the deterministic physical world to make the non-determined choice. We are back in the land of dualism, with its non-physical conscious agent.

It is hard to understand how a non-physical agent could affect anything in the physical world. It would have to break into the chain of cause and effect of the physical world somehow. But that would seem to imply a causal

### "I see the issue of free will as not merely an issue of physical determinism"

ability which itself would make it the same (or at least similar to) the physical world itself. This is one of the arguments against dualism. Dualism when closely examined seems incoherent, the more so if it involves effects on the physical as in acts of free will.

So I see the issue of free will as not merely an issue of physical determinism, but as an issue about the feasibility of non-physical agents affecting the physical. Michael implies or assumes the existence of non-physical agents, but does not explicitly say so in his article.

Regarding determinism itself, it is worth mentioning that quantum mechanics is regarded as a deterministic theory, in spite of the existence of 'spontaneous' events and probabilities rather than certainties. The overall march of events follows deterministic laws in that outcomes are determined according to definite probabilities, even though each specific outcome is not predetermined. As far as 'spontaneous' events (like radioactive decay) are concerned the theory still does

not allow room for these events to be 'caused' by any non-physical agent. Even if we were to class these events as non-deterministic, the essential point of quantum mechanics is that we cannot control these individual events (by deciding which particular event or outcome will occur at any particular time). Of what use is that to free will?

Michael's article is a good, albeit brief, exposé of issues concerning free will. Its final paragraph bears also on the whole idea of paranormal phenomena. He defines paranormal phenomena as phenomena involving

## Commentary on Thalbourne's "Free Will" (cont'd from page 2)

"illicit" causal relations—i.e., causal relations outside the bounds of known physics. I point out that this could mean that paranormal phenomena either involve presently unknown physics or involve violations of physics altogether. The latter would imply dualism, the former not.

Science itself tacitly assumes the existence of free will in that scientists assume they are free to choose experimental setups and to choose which measurements they perform. This is in the nature of a customary 'working assumption' rather than a philosophically thought-through position. In fact, however, the implications of determinism undermine these assumptions. The concept of free will to which science points is the "compatibilist" view explained by Michael. That is, the choices we make, which are determined by physical processes in our brains, are what we *mean* by free will.

To many people this is a cop-out and is not at all what we

should mean by free will. Yet as I have pointed out, this intuitive understanding of free will implies separate non-physical agents which do not operate according to our deterministic laws of cause and effect. This is hard to reconcile with the picture we have of the physical world. It's a question which remains unresolved, but Michael makes a good case for classifying free will as *intuitively* understood within the category of paranormal phenomena.  $\Psi$

\* \* \*

### The Weird and the Wonderful by Hannah Jenkins (cont'd from page 4)

Instead, if I can rule out any normal explanation (creaking floorboards or faulty wiring), I consider the phenomena anomalous, but not necessarily indicative of other-worldly spirit activity. There is a possibility that the person is causing the anomalous events themselves, something which I think is more likely in

most cases. Even so, it is not appropriate to dominate the investigation with a lecture on how to assess vying explanations of the same data set. Instead, as is advised by Baker and O'Keeffe (2007), investigators should "present their findings in a sensitive and neutral manner, so as not to challenge the experient's world view unduly, but to strive to encourage open discussion and create an environment of free response for the experient."<sup>1</sup> Wise words which I try to heed.

As I became more comfortable being involved in these investigations, I also became more aware that being asked into a person's home and invited to listen to the stories of sometimes terrified people—scared both because of the experiences but also because they are worried others will think them insane—is something that the field of psi research needs to continue to engage with and develop explanations for.

The people who contact the AIPR provide us with real life stories of experiences similar to those which inspired the early psi investigators to

conduct surveys of anecdotal evidence of the anomalous. That they are experiencing events which we can't readily explain means that we still have a long way to go before these reports can be dealt with in a meaningful way that transcends the debates about the evidence in the field of psi research. So much is still unknown about the mechanisms and origins of anomalous experience, I've never felt we have the authority to claim definitively what it is the person is experiencing. There is much to do.

I am happy that people continue to report their experiences to the AIPR and similar organisations. Hopefully psi researchers can also help in a small way to put the experiences into perspective, even if we have to admit that we still don't know for sure what goes bump in the night.  $\Psi$

#### Notes:

1. I. S. Baker, & C. O'Keeffe, "Ethical guidelines for the investigation of haunting experiences," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 71 (2007): 216-229.



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The *Australian Journal of Parapsychology* features research articles on ESP (extra-sensory perception), PK (psychokinesis), and the afterlife.

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(see page 4)

The Australian Institute of Parapsychological Research is a non-profit community association. Based in Sydney but with a world-wide membership base, it was established in 1977. The aims of the organisation are:

- To collect, assess and disseminate factual information about claims of psychic (paranormal) phenomena.
- To support and encourage parapsychology (the scientific study of paranormal phenomena).
- To undertake or promote activities (e.g., fundraising, social activities, etc.) in support of the above.

**Looking for information on the paranormal?** The AIPR has fact sheets on:

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- Near-death experiences
- The human aura

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## The Weird and the Wonderful by Hannah Jenkins

*Bumps in the Night:* For many years my name and email address were listed as the contact point for the AIPR. The emails that made their way to my inbox usually fell into one of four categories: (i) requests for information to help with a student's assignment, (ii) requests to be tested for psi 'powers', (iii) requests from the media for opinion on paranormal topics, and (iv) requests for help to deal with paranormal disturbances (ghosts and the like). It was the fourth that was the trickiest to deal with.

Recently I had cause to draw on these experiences as a colleague and I were both contacted in the same week by two separate people who had both experienced similar poltergeist-like events both in the vicinity of a small child. We've been subsequently asked to make an investigation which is ongoing at the moment. The experience prompted the topic for this issue's column, which is a short reflection on some of the issues raised when asked to undertake investigations.

As a psi researcher with a background in philosophy my concern is to assess and explain the anomalous at a theoretical level. But when I started receiving first-hand

accounts of the anomalous, and the invitation to investigate them, it was initially confronting. Most of the people were scared and wanted reassurance, but I was afraid myself: What if the people were crazy? What if they were trying to hoodwink me? What if I couldn't help? What if some really were possessed by a demon (as was suggested by some of the incoming reports)? What would I do except to ask cluelessly "What would Buffy do?"

But, in the main, the people making these reports were very sensible, often skeptical, and concerned to share their stories with a sympathetic person who could confirm they were experiencing something paranormal and help explain it. I also discovered that investigations were a two-way street where both parties stood to gain. Psi researchers are provided with real-life experiences of the anomalous and the experiencers are provided with a wider, informed context for their experiences.

But first I had to find my way through the tricky position that the investigator is placed in—an authority in an area where there is still so much unknown. Unlike a tradesperson asked into a home to fix a particular problem, there's no

TAFE course or apprenticeship which provides the investigator with a manual on what to do.

Even amongst experienced investigators there are differing protocols of investigation. For instance, an investigator from CSI (formerly CSICOP) will approach an apparent poltergeist case in a very different way to a Catholic priest.

And even amongst the strictly scientific investigators there are many and varied interpretations of the phenomena (dualist, materialist) which impact on styles of investigation. So you need to first work through a lot of explanatory issues to get to a point where you feel comfortable analysing what you are presented with.

And there were also the beliefs of the experiencers to take into consideration. The AIPR, as a not-for-profit organisation, provides investigation services free of charge to those who want to share and understand anomalous experiences. It also maintains a scientific approach to explanation of the anomalous: First, rule out any normal explanation, then, whatever is left requires further investigation as a possibly anomalous phenomenon. In my view, it is important not to let assumptions about the

cause of the phenomena over-ride investigation of the phenomena. So an unexplained loud bump in the night is not necessarily a ghost. However, this view does not always fit in with the beliefs of the people experiencing the phenomena. And this is where the theoretical approach is not always appropriate at a human level.

These investigations also highlight how popular assumptions about what constitutes a paranormal experience are often based on where our culture has historically looked for explanation of the phenomena and what popular culture reinforces through films, TV, and books.

For instance, most people think that phenomena, such as loud noises in areas and at times when such noises can't be explained by normal means, indicate ghosts which are the spirits of people who have died and who likely once lived in the place where the anomalous events are occurring. But I am not convinced that this is the best explanation for what people experience when strange events like footsteps in the hall late at night are heard, or objects are moved or turned on with no apparent cause.

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