

The Question Is - Who Am I ?

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Who am I? Perhaps this is the only question life really throws at us. Maybe all our scientific endeavours are, one way or another, directed at it. Maybe cosmologists trying to understand the origin of the universe, biologists working on evolution or psychologists studying behaviour are driven by the same desire to know. Or perhaps I shouldn't speak for anyone else and only say that for me it is this way. My scientific work comes out of the question I am driven to ask when lying in the bath, travelling in an extraordinary altered state or sitting in meditation. Science and living life are the same thing and require the same commitment and principles.

I was sitting in a pizza restaurant in Bristol one day with a good friend and teacher when he scribbled on a paper napkin "What drives you?" Not another impenetrable koan! I was somewhat offended. Am I so obviously "driven"? Yes, I rush constantly from one thing to the next, rarely rest, almost never watch TV or even sit and listen to music. Living is working and playing with my children, weeding the garden and cleaning the house. Something drives me. It is all part of the same question.

So I was delighted when Rhea asked me to write this profile of myself. Many of you may think that Rhea and I are, academically or in terms of our beliefs, poles apart. I don't think so. In my rare meetings with her and infrequent but valued correspondence I have often been struck by the similarities not the differences in our ideas. So I am glad to take up her request to write about how I became interested in parapsychology and what my work is about. I shall use it to try to give three kinds of answer to the question. Who am I - a few facts, who am I - the scientific question and who am I - the inner question.

A Few Facts

I was born in London to well-off parents who wanted me to have the best and expected a great deal of me. Although I was very happy as a young Tom-boy, I was desperately miserable to be sent away at 13 to an oppressive and expensive boarding school. I was frightened (of doing the wrong thing, of not succeeding, of not having any friends) and bored - a terrible combination. Oxford, when I went there in 1970 to study physiology and psychology, was a real challenge. I was far from the cleverest there, which was a shock and an inspiration. It was there I learned about psychical research and conceived an enduring passion for the subject. I soon found myself running the student Psychical Research Society and wondering why my tutors wouldn't take the subject seriously.

After that, accepting that I would never get a grant to study parapsychology, I found a part-time job and funded myself through a PhD in parapsychology, which I gained in 1980 for research on ESP and memory. It is probably for that work that I am most loved or hated because it overthrew my prior beliefs in everything and anything paranormal and set me off on a far more skeptical path.

In 1980 I worked for a few months at the parapsychology lab at Utrecht, in the Netherlands, and after that was awarded the Perrott-Warrick Studentship in Psychical Research to work on OBEs. Although most people assume that I have long had an academic post at the University of Bristol, it is not so. For many years I brought up my two children, Emily now 10 and Jolyon now 8, and worked freelance as a writer, on TV and radio, and as a part-time lecturer at both Bath and Bristol Universities. Just this year, after my marriage ended, I took up my first real job as a psychology lecturer at the University of the

West of England.

Although it is hard working the way I did, with very little money and doing much academic work unpaid, with uncertain status and insecure future, it gave me great freedom. I could always follow the results of my own and others' research independent of what anyone wanted the results to be. This, to me, is the only enduring principle of science, which is otherwise totally open to change and evolution, that you listen to the results of research and change your opinion accordingly. The uncertainty of my position gave me the chance to do that.

In 1981 I was elected to the council of the SPR, in 1988 made a Fellow of CSICOP and in 1991 elected to their Executive Council. If there is any conflict there it is in the eyes of the people who keep telling me I should leave one or other "side" of the "battle". The SPR was formed in 1882 to "Examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis". CSICOP was formed in 1976 and claims to encourage "the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view" and "research by objective and impartial inquiry".

Neither organisation truly lives up to its ideals but that is no reason for me not to belong to both and to keep trying to do that work myself. If there is a battle it is not one I want to win or lose.

The Scientific Work

As far as I can recall (and more of the strangeness of memory in a moment) I once thought I could answer the question by studying psi. I had this brilliant (I modestly thought) theory. Roughly it was that ESP was a perfectly natural process. All information about anything that ever happened was stored in some way "out there". It was something like the Akashic Record I had learned about in my fairly extensive occult studies - a world of "thought forms". Anyone could access any of them. If you accessed events directly it was clairvoyance; someone else's thoughts and it was telepathy; your own it was memory. Memory was therefore a special case of ESP. This theory appealed to me enormously. Memory had always fascinated me, partly because its physiological basis was not then at all understood but more directly because the best remembered moments in my life were moments of great clarity and immediacy in which I seemed most alive. That seemed to be what I wanted to understand. Who was remembering whom? What is the relationship between me then and me now? Who am I?

The theory also appealed aesthetically, seemed to fit with my own experience, and was testable. My PhD and several of my earliest papers were about my attempts to test it (Blackmore 1980 a,b,c). I suppose it was possible that the experiments might have worked. It would certainly have been fun to find the relationship between ESP and memory, refine the theory, and discover the basis of memory with a bold extension into parapsychology. But the theory was rubbish.

I found this out in two ways; not only did the experiments fail to find any psi - leading to my increasing doubts about the whole psi hypothesis - but my own reading and thinking revealed that (a) the theory was not new and (b) there were totally crushing arguments against it and theories like it.

I learnt a great deal from all of this. I discovered the value of self-criticism. If you are lucky other people will provide the criticisms you need and if you can bring yourself to listen you learn from them but in the end, if the theory needs abandoning, only you can do it. I also came across some powerful arguments that have stood me in good stead again and again. For example, the universe is not naturally divided into things or objects, events or moments (It is not naturally parsed as Stephen Braude often told me). All divisions are mental creations. Any theory that depends on intrinsic objects is doomed to failure.

Perhaps more importantly the same thing applies to similarity. There is no intrinsic similarity between things, only similarity for some person, animal or other behaving system. It is for this reason that I now reject many other appealing theories such as Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance (Sheldrake, 1981).

I also learned in this context a lesson I have had to learn all over again in many other contexts and probably will never fully get the hang of - that is letting go. It is so easy just to build up more and more ideas, accumulate more knowledge, hang onto every good idea you ever have but it is destructive. It was painful for me to see that I was wrong but it was essential to clear away the debris and let go. I have described the difficulty of making such a change already (Blackmore 1986a, 1987). I hope I shall always be able to do it again if necessary - and that it might even get easier with practice.

So - I was no longer a student with a brilliant idea. Stuck with a lot of failed experiments and no theory to call my own I began to ask myself why I'd got into this in the first place. It clearly had a lot to do with my first OBE which happened in 1970 during my first term at Oxford. I therefore went back to that experience itself. Instead of looking to the red herring of psi to answer my questions I tried to work out what had happened during those few hours. It was the clarity and realness that had stunned me, the sense of everything being just right as it was, the sense of myself being everything and nothing. How could I begin to understand that?

I started by developing a theory, or in fact several versions of theories, and trying to test them. This led to my writing "Beyond the Body" (1982) and to my many surveys of OBEs, lucid dreams and other related experiences (e.g. 1984, 1986b). This has been much more of an adventure than my aborted search for psi was, or at least it has held more surprises and come closer to addressing the pertinent questions. The long process yielded many discoveries. Some came from other people's work, such as Cowan's theory of the origin of tunnel hallucinations or the evidence that endorphins lower the seizure threshold in the temporal lobe and are released near death (see Blackmore 1993). Others came from people's descriptions of experiences and still others from my own experiences. I often feel that I have added little that is new beyond pulling together a lot of previously disparate ideas. Yet I think that my current theory of OBEs and NDEs fits my own experiences better than any of the previous ones. I no longer think anything leaves the body in an OBE. Rather it is the brain's attempt to construct a convincing "model of reality" from memory and imagination when its sensory input has failed to provide one. Like other features of the NDE I think it requires no psychic explanation, only a rethinking of our ideas about self in the world.

This year I finished writing a book "Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience" to be published in June 1993. I tried to bring together everything I have learned and thought about OBEs, the tunnel experience, life reviews, hallucinations and mystical experiences. It is a book I expect many people to hate. I have tried to explain all the aspects of the NDE without recourse either to the paranormal or to life after death. Perhaps more radically I have argued that there was no one there to die in the first place. It is the illusion that we are a separate self that makes us find a mystery in the relationship between mind and body and fuels the search for evidence that we survive death.

I expect to get many critical and even offensive reviews but in this, as in many other areas of research, I have been delighted and comforted to find real friends who totally disagree with me. One such is Kenneth Ring whose theories could not be further from mine, yet we correspond regularly and enjoy our rare chances to meet and exchange ideas.

A final thread to my work has been experiments on probability judgement and belief in the paranormal. It came from a simple idea. As soon as I found myself dropping many of my own beliefs I began to wonder why so many people do believe in telepathy, clairvoyance and so on. I soon discovered (e.g. in

a mail survey in Bristol in 1984) that the main reason people give is personal experience. Could there be normal explanations for apparently psychic experiences?

One might be the misjudgments of probability that lead us to search for explanations where none is required. If so sheep should have a poorer understanding of probability than goats. This prediction had largely held (Blackmore and Troscianko 1985, Blackmore 1992) and, after many years, given me the gratifying sense of actually making some progress that I never got when I was searching for psi.

I have done other research and writing, on psi in the ganzfeld, ESP in children, the Tarot, lucid dreams, meditation and on consciousness. If there is any underlying thread it is the attempt to understand exceptional human experiences, as Rhea has so aptly named them, without recourse to the psi hypothesis. I now see my early hunt for psi as doomed to failure and my return to the experiences themselves as far more useful.

Why, then, do I not declare myself to be a complete disbeliever (or dogmatic skeptic), denounce parapsychology and leave the SPR and the PA? Is it only that I love going to the conventions and parties, or to the Euro-PA where I can argue with friends about the observational theories or whether psi can be seen as macro-level non-local correlations with no information transfer? Is it only because, as was suggested many years ago, I still want to get my "50 cents worth" in the Royal Nonsuch of Parapsychology? (Gibson, 1979).

No. It comes right back to this question of the sides of the battle. For me there is no real battle. There is simply a vast range of exceptional human experiences; experiences that terrify or uplift us, and experiences that seem to carry mystical insights of extraordinary clarity and realness. If the scientific method can ever shine light on these experiences then that is what I am trying to do.

The psi hypothesis is not my favourite. Yet it may have something to it. The recent meta-analyses appear to show reliable findings over decades and scores of experiments. No critic has yet undermined them (though they yet may). Honorton's auto-ganzfeld has yielded significant effects of the expected size and kind and as reported the methods appear superbly well controlled (Honorton et al., 1990). They are at least enough to make me sit up and think. I personally doubt that psi will prove a worthwhile idea but other people disagree with me and that is fair enough. What we always need in any science is lots of rival ideas one can criticise and put to the test, following up the good ones and letting go of the failures. I think I can best contribute by being both a parapsychologist and a sceptic and trying out any ideas I can whichever "side" anyone else might put me or them on.

The Inner Question

Rhea is an exceptional person. It is only because I am writing this profile for her journal and not for any other than I can feel free to write about the more personal side of the question. For me, as I think for her, the two are not separate. I am not sure whether this is a peculiarly feminine way of doing science, as some feminists have argued, but it is certainly my way of doing it. When I had the temerity, in 1986, to write an autobiography I tried explicitly to write about my life and my science together. I wanted to write a book that would tell others who had the same passion for the paranormal as I did what happens when you try to do experiments on psi. This was part of my life, connected to my loves and traumas and I wrote that way. I suppose I should have expected the wise-cracks - "Calling it "My Early Years" are you?", "When's Part 2 coming out?" or even the fears "You won't put me in your next book will you?" (Everyone who is quoted in "The Adventures" gave their permission or even wrote their quotes themselves.). I did not expect the review that declared it was written in the style of pulp romantic fiction and devoid of scientific value - which nearly reduced me to tears. Only years later did I wonder whether the male reviewer had actually read any pulp romantic fiction. The book itself may be embarrassingly

naive but I stand by its attempt to portray science and life as inextricable. For me they are.

One way they are linked is in trying to live life as the kind of creature science teaches us we are. As I understand it it is something like this. People have evolved through natural selection for no purpose and with no end in sight. Dawkins' "Blind Watchmaker" (1986) has created us, intelligent and aware, but ultimately pointless. Our behaviour is controlled by brains that process information in multiply connected neural networks. Inside there is nothing but those networks, no separate self or inner homunculus. The idea of the deciding, acting, feeling self is a mental construction built by that brain through its social interactions and linguistic ability.

It is the evidence and thinking, not some kind of prior bias that leads me to this view. The mysteries of memory which I once thought to solve with psi are now on their way to solution through the understanding of neural nets. Libet's (1985) famous experiments on deliberate voluntary action reveal (though there are many possible interpretations) that the sense of having willed an action is a construction after the fact. My early thoughts on the power of thought forms seem so much waffle by comparison. Philosopher Dan Dennett (1991) has used much empirical evidence as well as philosophical thought to destroy the idea of the "Cartesian Theatre"; that mythical place where sensations and imaginings are brought together to be seen and actions are decided upon. No - there is no such place and no one in there.

How do you live accepting this about yourself? Isn't it hard, cold, unfeeling and cruel? No. I think the essential insights that science is forcing on us are precisely the same as those the Buddha discovered when he sat under a tree with an unshakable determination to look inside himself and see what was there. What he saw is described in the Buddhist notion of "no-self" and the doctrine of dependent co-origination - a sort of causeless interconnectedness of arising events. They are just as difficult to accept for us now as they were for people then but whether you want to do it or not depends on whether you want to face up to the truth.

In my attempts to find myself I have tried many things. Drugs are an endlessly fascinating route. I have long been impressed by people, like Charlie Tart, who have explored long and hard and given up drugs as a route. I have learned much from anaesthetics like ketamine, from simple ordinary but ever-teaching cannabis and of course from the hallucinogens, DMT, psilocybin and that touch-stone of them all, LSD. But the image of the mountain is a good one. The drugs take you up in a helicopter. You see what's there, you may be inspired to climb yourself, but they cannot keep you there. And it is only by climbing yourself that you discover the mountain does not exist after all.

I have meditated for many years. I first learned at a time when I was training in Caballistic magic, studying Tarot and practising various biofeedback techniques. On and off I tried to establish a regular practice and failed. But eventually, six or seven years ago I began a regular daily practice. The kind of meditation that appeals to me is absolutely simple, just sitting, eyes open, often at a white wall, otherwise before whatever is there. I sometimes go on Ch'an (Chinese Zen) retreats, mainly because they are uncluttered; silent, hours and hours of practice from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. interrupted only by brief work periods and meals. The silence quickly dismantles the socially constructed self, the routine and discipline undermine the illusion of making decisions. And what is left? As the teacher once remarked "There's only you and the wall and you can't blame the wall."

Meditation is only part of the practice. The rest is a commitment to awareness in daily life. Perhaps I should hesitate to say "I made" such a commitment for in a way it made itself. And what is awareness? Though I teach courses on "The psychology of consciousness" I can give no clear answer but it seems to have a lot to do with paying attention and this leads to more empirical questions I would like to explore one day. But attention to what? The most obvious answer is probably "to the present moment".

This raises difficult questions about how you plan and make decisions for the future if you are living only in the moment. Perhaps here the experiments in cognitive psychology and the Buddhist ideas both help. In the former view it is the representation constructed by the neural nets on the basis of past experience that determine decisions to act - not some central self. In the latter it is all part of the underlying flowing process of dependent co-origination, not the illusory self. If no-one is really making decisions then the future will certainly happen just the same, indeed it may happen without a whole lot of that pointless agonising about making the right choice or regretting decisions after the fact.

More and more this is the way I live. Confronted with choices I think through the alternatives, consider the consequences and implications but I no longer think that "I" have to decide for that would be an illusion. Sure enough, decisions are made and actions happen. I might ask myself where my work is going or what I will do next but from past experience I expect that opportunities will present themselves and I will or will not take them. I'll have ideas and will or will not follow them up. Commitment to awareness and a simple practice seem to help.

I certainly have fears but again experience teaches me to let them go. The most crucial lessons have been of losing things I thought I needed. My theory of ESP was only one. The worst was losing my husband whom I dearly loved but who eventually did not love me. This terrible loss, that I fought like mad against at the time, turns out to have been positive beyond anything I'd expected. As a mother my worst fear is harm to or loss of my children but all I can do is encourage them to be themselves, teach them what I can and let them go too.

So how do you live in a world that is full of violence and torture, oppression and just plain ordinary unhappiness? One trick I have learned is to let fear, guilt or unhappiness be. This way I discovered that the worst thing is refusing to be unhappy as though there were something wrong with it. The obstructions put in the way of difficult or unpleasant feelings are usually worse than the feelings themselves. I have even come to accept a saying that shocked me deeply the first time I heard it that "the best thing I can do for you is to work on myself". It seemed terribly "selfish" (i.e. bad) but odd things happen to one's idea of selfishness if there is, as both science and Buddhism seem to suggest, no enduring self but only a mental construction. It is said that this way lies true compassion though I shall have to wait and see about that.

This may all seem like a huge digression, perhaps not of direct interest to the readers of *Exceptional Human Experience*. But it has been my way of taking up Rhea's kind invitation to write about myself and say who I am.

So who am I? I am tempted to give my favourite answer "I don't know". But even that would be inappropriate. I - as a body, a public person and the subject of these sentences can only answer by means like writing this essay. "I" as a mental model can never know except by embedding models within models. Really "I" can do nothing but go on living moment by moment until "I" die. Whether that will be at the same time as this body dies or before I cannot predict. I am as sure as I can be that it won't be afterwards.

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