

Precognition

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Precognition (from the Latin *præ-*, "before" and *cognitio*, "acquiring knowledge"), also called prescience, future vision, future sight is an alleged psychic ability to see events in the future.

As with other forms of extrasensory perception, there is no reliable scientific evidence that precognition is a real ability possessed by anyone and it is widely considered to be pseudoscience. Specifically, precognition appears to violate the principle that an effect cannot occur before its cause.

Despite the lack of scientific evidence, many people believe it is a real phenomenon. There are many reports of precognition and it remains a topic of research and discussion within the parapsychology community.

Belief

There is no accepted scientific evidence that precognition exists and it is widely considered to be pseudoscience.

Despite this, many people believe in precognition. Precognition of earthquakes has been claimed.

Some surveys have been carried out on psychological reasons for belief in precognition. A 1978 Gallup poll found that 37% of Americans surveyed believed in precognition. According to psychologists Tobacyk and Milford, belief was greater in college women than in men, and a 2007 Gallup poll found that women were more prone to superstitious beliefs in general. A 2013 study discovered that greater belief in precognition was held by those who feel low in control, and the belief can act as a psychological coping mechanism.

Experiments

Scientific investigation of parapsychology is complicated by the definition which implies that the phenomena go against established principles of science.

In the early 20th century J. W. Dunne, a British aeronautics engineer, experienced several dreams which he regarded as precognitive. He developed techniques to record and analyse them, identifying any correspondences between his future experiences and his recorded dreams. He reported his findings in his 1927 book *An Experiment with Time*. In it he alleges that 10% of his dreams appeared to represent some future experience. He also persuaded some friends to try the experiment on themselves, with mixed results. Dunne concluded that precognitive dreams are common and that many people unknowingly have them. The book went on to develop an explanatory theory of time and consciousness which he called Serialism. In 1932 he helped the Society for Psychical Research to conduct a more formal experiment, but he and the Society's lead researcher failed to agree on the significance of the results. Dunne's work was nevertheless widely

read and "undoubtedly helped to form something of the imaginative climate of those years". The Philosopher C. D. Broad remarked that, "The only theory known to me which seems worth consideration is that proposed by Mr. Dunne in his Experiment with Time."

The first ongoing and organized research program on precognition was instituted by Joseph Banks Rhine in the 1930s at Duke University's Parapsychology Laboratory. Rhine used a method of forced-choice matching in which participants guessed the order of a deck of 25 cards, each five of which bore one of five geometrical symbols. The experiment was not blinded, so participants were able to read the symbols through the back of the cards, and were able to see and hear the experimenters throughout the experiment. This sensory leakage contributed to Rhine's experiments being discredited.

Samuel G. Soal ran forced-choice ESP experiments in which someone attempted to identify which of five animal pictures a subject in another room was looking at. Their performance on this task was at chance, but when the scores were matched with the card that came after the target card, three of the thirteen subjects showed a very high hit rate. Rhine described Soal's work as "a milestone in the field". George Price reviewed the experiment in *Science* in 1955, and concluded that the positive results not attributable to error were more likely the result of deliberate fraud. This prompted several replies that Price's criticism was unfair. In 1978, the experiments were exposed as fraudulent. The statistician and paragnost Betty Markwick, while seeking to vindicate Soal, discovered that he had altered his data to create all the extra hits and give the study its statistical significance. The untainted experimental results showed no evidence of precognition in the hits or the ratios.

Following these experiments, a more automated technique of experimentation was introduced that did not rely on hand-scoring of equivalence between targets and guesses, and in which the targets could be more reliably and readily tested at random. This involved testing for precognition with the use of high-speed random event generators (REG), as introduced by Helmut Schmidt in 1969, and at the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Lab. The psychologist C. E. M. Hansel found flaws in all of Schmidt's experiments into precognition. Hansel found that necessary precautions were not taken, there was no presence of an observer or second-experimenter in any of the experiments, no counterchecking of the records and no separate machines used for high and low score attempts.

"Feeling the Future"

In 2011, the psychologist Daryl Bem, a Professor Emeritus at Cornell University, published the article "Feeling the Future: Experimental Evidence for Anomalous Retroactive Influences on Cognition and Affect" in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, offering statistical evidence for precognition. The paper itself was criticised. The publication of such a paper by a

respected researcher in an upper tier journal also prompted wider debate on the validity of peer review process for allowing it. Bem appeared on MSNBC and The Colbert Report to discuss the experiment.

Jeffrey Rouder and Richard Morey applied a meta-analytical Bayes factor to Bem's data and concluded that, We remain unconvinced of the viability of ESP. There is no plausible mechanism for it, and it seems contradicted by well-substantiated theories in both physics and biology. Against this background, a change in odds of 40 is negligible.

Psychologist James Alcock claimed to have found serious methodological flaws (metaphorical "dirty test tubes") such as changing the procedures part way through the experiments and combining results of tests with different chances of significance. It was not recorded how many tests were actually performed, nor was there an explanation of how it was determined that participants shown erotic images had "settled down" afterwards. Bem's response to Alcock's critique appeared online at the Skeptical Inquirer website and Alcock replied to these comments in a third article at the same website.

In 2012, the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology published an independent attempt to reproduce Bem's results, which failed to do so.

Scientific reception

There is no known mechanism for precognition. Precognition would violate the principle of antecedence (causality), that an effect does not happen before its cause.

The physicist John Taylor has written "since only positive energies are possible, particles going backward in time cannot exist. Any claim that they do is purely a fantasy in the mind of the parapsychologist. There is therefore no direct justification for precognition from physics... experimental evidence from high energy physics is strongly against it."

Neuroscientist Samuel Schwarzkopf has written that precognition contradicts "most of the neuroscience and psychology literature, from electrophysiology and neuroimaging to temporal effects found in psychophysical research."

Various psychological processes have been offered to explain experiences of apparent precognition. These include:

Selection bias where people remember the "hits" and forget the "misses", remember coincidences more often than other non-coincidences, or when they were correct about a future event rather than instances when they were wrong. Examples include thinking of a specific person before that person calls on the phone. Human memory, it is argued, has a tendency to record instances when

the guess was correct, and to dismiss instances when the guess was incorrect.

Unconscious perception by which people unconsciously infer, from data they have unconsciously learned, that a certain event will probably happen in a certain context. As with cryptomnesia, when the event occurs, the former knowledge appears to have been acquired without the aid of recognized channels of information.

Self-fulfilling prophecy and Unconscious enactment in which people bring events that they have precognized to pass, but without their conscious knowledge.

Some psychologists have explained the apparent prevalence of precognitive dreams in terms of memory biases, namely a selective memory for accurate predictions and distorted memory so that dreams are retrospectively fitted onto subsequent events. In one experiment, subjects were asked to write down their dreams in a diary. This prevented the selective memory effect, and the dreams no longer seemed accurate about the future. Another experiment gave subjects a fake diary of a student with apparently precognitive dreams. This diary described events from the person's life, as well as some predictive dreams and some non-predictive dreams. When subjects were asked to recall the dreams they had read, they remembered more of the successful predictions than unsuccessful ones.

In dreams

An early inquiry into allegedly prophetic dreams was done by Aristotle in his *On Divination in Sleep*. His criticism of these claims appeals to the fact that "the sender of such dreams should be God", and "the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely commonplace persons." Thus: "Most dreams are, however, to be classed as mere coincidences...", here "coincidence" being defined by Aristotle as that which does not take "place according to a universal or general rule" and referring to things which are not of themselves by necessity causally connected. His example being taking a walk during an eclipse, neither the walk nor the eclipse being apparently causally connected and so only by "coincidence" do they occur simultaneously.

J. W. Dunne believed that dream precognition did not reference any kind of future event, but specifically the future experiences of the dreamer. He was led to this idea when he found that a dream of a volcanic eruption appeared to foresee not the disaster itself but his subsequent misreading of an inaccurate account in a newspaper. In 1963 the BBC television programme *Monitor* broadcast an appeal by the writer J.B. Priestley for experiences which challenged our understanding of Time. He received hundreds of letters in reply and believed that many of them described genuine precognitive dreams. In 2014 the BBC Radio 4 broadcaster Francis Spufford revisited Priestley's work and its relation to the ideas of J.W. Dunne.

In 1932 Charles Lindbergh's infant son was kidnapped, murdered and buried among trees. The psychologists Henry Murray and D. R. Wheeler tested precognitive dreams by inviting the public to

report any dreams of the child. A total of 1,300 dreams were reported. Only five percent envisioned the child dead and only 4 of the 1,300 envisioned the location of the grave as amongst trees. This number was no better than chance.

David Ryback, a psychologist in Atlanta, used a questionnaire survey approach to investigate precognitive dreaming in college students. His survey of over 433 participants showed that 290 or 66.9 percent reported some form of paranormal dream. He rejected many of these reports, but claimed that 8.8 percent of the population was having actual precognitive dreams.

Dreams which appear to be precognitive may in fact be the result of the law of large numbers. The psychologist Stuart Sutherland has written:

Suppose that you can remember ten incidents from a night's dreaming, at least when prompted by a similar incident occurring a day. Now consider how many incidents occur during a day, including those you read about in the paper, watch on television or hear from your friends. There are a vast number and it is highly probable that from time to time one of them will, at least to some extent, resemble one of those from your dreams. When one or more of these coincidences occur, people are likely to conclude that dreams foretell the future.

Robert Todd Carroll, author of *The Skeptic's Dictionary*, put it this way: "Say the odds are a million to one that when a person has a dream of an airplane crash, there is an airplane crash the next day. With 6 billion people having an average of 250 dream themes each per night, there should be about 1.5 million people a day who have dreams that seem clairvoyant."