

Einstein and ESP

Martin Gardner

Einstein is frequently mentioned in the literature of parapsychology as a great scientist who, in contrast to so many of his colleagues, believed that psi phenomena had been demonstrated by the work of J. B. Rhine and his successors. In 1930 when Upton Sinclair published his book *Mental Radio*, Einstein contributed a brief preface to the German edition. In the American edition, the preface reads as follows:

I have read the book of Upton Sinclair with great interest and am convinced that the same deserves the most earnest consideration, not only of the laity, but also of the psychologists by profession. The results of the telepathic experiments carefully and plainly set forth in this book stand surely far beyond those which a nature investigator holds to be thinkable. On the other hand, it is out of the question in the case of so conscientious an observer and writer as Upton Sinclair that he is carrying on a conscious deception of the reading world; his good faith and dependability are not to be doubted. So if somehow the facts here set forth rest not upon telepathy, but upon some unconscious hypnotic influence from person to person, this also would be of high psychological interest. In no case should the psychologically interested circles pass over this book heedlessly.

Parapsychologists, and journalists who write about the paranormal, often refer to this preface, sometimes quoting from it, as evidence of Einstein's belief in ESP. R. A. McConnell, for example, in his influential article, "Parapsychology and Physicists" (*Journal of Parapsychology*, Vol. 40, September 1976), lists Einstein, along with William Crookes, Oliver Lodge, and other physicists, as one of the "Titans" who were sympathetic toward psi research. A portion of Einstein's preface is quoted.

An even longer quotation appears in chapter 7 of *Mind-Reach*, the recently published book by Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff. The chapter

is about their work with Uri Geller—tests which they are convinced demonstrated beyond any doubt the clairvoyant powers of the Israeli psychic. To put their Geller experiments in perspective, and to argue that Geller's ability is not unique, they bring up Sinclair's book, quote from Einstein's preface, and ask, "Why then has this treasure trove of a book been neglected for the past forty-five years?"

It is not my purpose to explain here why I do not believe Sinclair's book should be taken seriously, because I have summarized my reasons in chapter 25 of my 1952 book, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. If the reader will consult this book's index for page references to Sinclair, they will understand why I regard him as sincere and honest, but incredibly gullible. He had only the dimmest grasp of scientific method and (in my opinion) was an unreliable observer and reporter of the uncontrolled, informal ESP-tests he conducted with his wife.

My purpose now is merely to reproduce, with the permission of the Einstein estate, a letter that Einstein wrote in 1946 to Jan Ehrenwald, and which came into my hands by way of physicists John Stachel and E. T. Newman. Dr. Ehrenwald is a British psychoanalyst now living in New York City where he is a consulting psychiatrist to Roosevelt Hospital. For thirty years he has been studying psi phenomena and seeking a neurological basis for it. He is the most distinguished of a trio of living psychoanalysts (the other two are Jule Eisenbud and Montague Ullman) who are firm believers in psi. Next year Basic Books will publish Ehrenwald's latest book, *The ESP Experience: A Psychiatric Validation*.

A translation of Einstein's letter (the original is in German) follows:

Dear Dr. Ehrenwald:

13 May 1946

I have read with great interest the introduction to your book,¹ as well as the story of all the unpleasant experiences you have suffered, as many others among us have. I am happy that you succeeded in emigrating to this country, and I hope that you will find here the possibilities for fruitful work.

Several years ago I read the book by Dr. Rhine. I have been unable to find an explanation for the facts which he enumerated. I regard it as very strange that the spatial distance between (telepathic) subjects has no relevance to the success of the statistical experiments. This suggests to me a very strong indication that a nonrecognized source of systematic errors may have been involved.

1. Dr. Ehrenwald had sent Einstein a copy of his book, *Telepathy and Medical Psychology* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946).

I prepared the introduction to Upton Sinclair's book because of my personal friendship with the author, and I did it without revealing my lack of conviction, but also without being dishonest. I admit frankly my skepticism in respect to all such beliefs and theories, a skepticism that is not the result of adequate acquaintance with the relevant experimental facts, but rather a lifelong work in physics. Moreover, I should like to admit, that, in my own life, I have not had any experiences which would throw light on the possibility of communication between human beings that was not based on normal mental processes. I should like to add that, since the public tends to give more weight to any statement from me than is justified, because of my ignorance in so many areas of knowledge, I feel the necessity of exercising utmost caution and restraint in the field under discussion. I should, however, be happy to receive a copy of your publication.

With many regards,
Albert Einstein

It is worthy of note that Einstein's main reason for skepticism is the fact, so often emphasized by Rhine, that reported psi forces do not decline with distance. All of the four known forces of nature—gravity, electromagnetism, the strong force, and the weak force—diminish in strength as they radiate from a source. Rhine has always considered this proof that psi forces lie entirely outside the bounds of known physical laws. In recent years, attempts to explain psi's independence of distance (as well as time!) have been varied—currently fashionable attempts draw on quantum mechanics—but none has been satisfactory or amenable to confirmation. Einstein found it easier to apply Occam's razor and adopt the simpler explanation: namely that some sort of bias, of which experimenters were unaware, entered into the experimental designs of psi experiments and accounted for the statistical results. If so, the failure of psi to decline with distance and time would be easily accounted for.

Einstein mentioned in his preface one possible source of bias in Upton Sinclair's tests. To spell it out: perhaps Mrs. Sinclair unconsciously suggested to her husband what he should draw, or he unconsciously suggested to her what she should draw. To give another instance, consider the possible role of hand-recorded errors in Rhine's early and poorly controlled PK experiments with dice. If bias were introduced by recording errors on the part of assistants who knew the target number (tests by psychologists have shown how common such recording errors are), it obviously would not matter in the least whether the subject was ten feet from the tumbling cubes, or ten miles, or in a submarine ten fathoms

down, or on a spaceship ten thousand miles out. It would not even matter if the dice were shaken and tossed ten hours after the subject had concentrated his PK energy on the target.

This independence of psi from time and space continues to be a dramatic and troubling aspect of psi research. A splendid example is provided by the latest remote-viewing tests of Puthoff and Targ. In their project "deep Quest," psychic superstars Hella Hammid and Ingo Swann were in a minisub, submerged off the coast off Catalina Island. They managed to describe the target sites, 500 miles away on land, as accurately as they had done in previous tests on land when the targets were nearby. In *Mind-Reach* the authors report that Ms. Hammid also did just as well in her remote viewing when the targets were randomly selected *after* she had made her report.

In his characteristically simple, humble, commonsense fashion, Einstein went directly to the hub of the matter. After a century of reporting of results by parapsychologists, the indifference of psi to all the rules that govern known forces continues to be (along with replication failures by unbelievers) a major reason why the majority of psychologists remain, like Einstein, highly skeptical of the reported extraordinary results. •