

Excerpt from “The truth about ESP”

By Robert Matthews

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After years of derision from the scientific establishment, the Koestler Institute believes it can show that extra-sensory perception does exist—and, says Robert Matthews, our science correspondent, the odds of it being wrong are 14 million to one.

I have been locked in a sound-proof room, I have got ping-pong balls taped over my eyes and hissing noises are being fed into my ears. All I need now is a smack across the head with a pistol, and I could be in Iraqi Police HQ. The illusion is spoiled only by the presence of Dr Caroline Watt checking to see if I feel comfortable and relaxed - which I do, curiously enough. It's odd how expectations alter perceptions.

As it happens, that is one of Dr Watt's current research interests here at the Koestler Institute at Edinburgh University. For she is one of a small team of scientists supported by a pounds 1.6 million fund left by the writer Arthur Koestler and his wife. Towards the end of his life the Hungarian-born writer, most famous for expressing his disillusionment with Communism in such works as *Darkness at Noon*, became fascinated by the connections between science, creativity and mysticism. Suffering from leukemia and Parkinson's disease, he killed himself in 1983 (his much younger wife Cynthia committing suicide at the same time); their joint estate was left for research into “parapsychological phenomena”: extra-sensory perception, clairvoyance and psychokinesis. In short, all the X-files stuff we find fascinating, but which stuffy conventional scientists won't touch with a barge-pole.

I am trying out the so-called ganzfeld experiment, something of a Koestler Institute speciality. The ping-pong balls and hissing sounds are, I am told, needed to dull down my conscious thoughts so that my unconscious abilities can shine through. The idea is that once I have spent half an hour or so

getting myself in a nice, relaxed state, one of Dr Watt's colleagues in the adjoining room could try to contact me telepathically, mentally beaming me an image picked at random by a computer. If I am capable of extra-sensory perception, then I should be able to pick up those thought waves, and correctly identify the picture when it is shown to me at the end of the test. As ever, I'm in too much of a rush for any of this relaxation stuff and give up after five minutes, my mind as tranquil as Victoria Coach Station. I settle instead for the vicarious excitement of hearing what happened during tests on the dozens of human guinea-pigs who have sat here, ping-pong balls on eyes, hiss in ears.

And the results are enough to spook anyone. For, according to Dr Watt and her colleagues, this room has been the scene of many impressive demonstrations of ESP. Some perfectly ordinary people, it seems, have the perfectly extraordinary ability to read the thoughts of others. Her boss, Professor Robert Morris, the director of the Koestler Institute, sums up the evidence to date thus: "Over the 10 years or so I have been here, I have come to the conclusion that the likelihood that something is going on has gone up, percentage-wise, from the low 80s to the low-to-medium 90s." It seems that while we have all been sitting slack-jawed in front of television watching agents Mulder and Scully sort out the X-files, real scientists have been doing real experiments, and reaching truly astonishing findings.

The latest will emerge at a meeting of the British Psychological Society to be held later this week, when Prof Morris will give preliminary results which may be the best evidence yet for the existence of ESP.

In a trial involving a total of more than 100 people, Morris and his colleagues found that subjects were able to pick out which of four pictures were being "beamed" to them with a success rate of almost 50 per cent—twice the 25 per cent rate expected if they were simply guessing. Which might not sound too impressive until one learns that the chances of doing this by fluke alone are staggeringly small: around 1 in 14 million. To put that figure in context, 1997 The scientists typically regard any result whose odds against fluke are less than one in 20 as being "significant". By those standards, Morris's latest evidence for ESP is almost a million times more convincing than much conventional scientific evidence. The results are 35,000 times more "significant" than the level of evidence governments demand of pharmaceutical companies before they will let a new drug on to the market. In short, by all the normal criteria of scientific evidence, Prof Morris and his team at the Koestler Institute have finally proved that ESP exists. As a cautious

research scientist, Prof Morris winces at talk of final proof: good scientists always admit there is room for doubt.

But orthodox scientists have no such qualms about talking in certainties. They are certain that, no matter how impressive the statistics, no matter how much evidence stacks up, there is—must be—something going wrong in that room with the ping-pong balls and headphones. Their view of the research at the Koestler Institute is succinctly put by Professor Lewis Wolpert of University College, London, chairman of the Committee for the Public Understanding of Science, and de facto spokesman for orthodox science: “It’s illegitimate—it’s absolute nonsense.” But what about those tiny statistical odds against a fluke result? Prof Wolpert couldn’t care less: “They have statistical evidence—oh, yawn. They’ve been claiming to have statistical evidence for years.” Exactly the same criticism could be levelled at huge swathes of conventional science, much of which is propped up more by statistical evidence than detailed understanding. ...