

The "filter theory", as one might call it, actually goes back to Henri Bergson, and has been taken up by various writers on extra-sensory perception. It is in fact simply an extrapolation from what we know about ordinary sensory perception. Our main sense organs are like narrow slits which admit only a very narrow frequency-range of electro-magnetic and sound waves. But even the amount that does get in through these narrow slits is too much. Life would be impossible if we were to pay attention to the millions of stimuli bombarding our senses—what William James called "the blooming, buzzing multitude of sensations". Thus the nervous system, and above all the brain, functions as a hierarchy of filtering and classifying devices which eliminate a large proportion of the sensory input as irrelevant "noise", and process the relevant information into manageable shape before it is presented to consciousness. An oft-quoted example of this filtering process is the "cocktail-party phenomenon" which enables us to isolate a single voice in the general buzz.

By analogy, a similar filtering mechanism might be assumed to protect us from the blooming, buzzing multitude of images, messages, impressions and confluential happenings in the "psycho-magnetic field" surrounding us. Since this is a point of great importance in trying to understand why paranormal phenomena present themselves in such inexplicable and arbitrary guises, I shall indulge in a few more quotations relevant to it. Thus the psychiatrist James S. Hayes, writing in *The Scientist Speculates*:*

* Ed. I. J. Good (London, 1962).

I have long felt that the conventional questions asked about telepathy ("Does it occur, and if so, how?") are less likely to be fruitful than the question: "If telepathy occurs at all, what prevents it from occurring all the time? How does the mind (or the brain) insulate itself from the potential influx of other people's experiences?"⁹

Next, Sir Cyril Burt again:

. . . Man's natural conception of the universe, or rather of the restricted portion of it with which he has to cope, is that of a world of tangible objects of moderate size, moving about with moderate speeds in a visible three-dimensional container under the impact of contact forces (the push and pull of simple mechanical interactions), all in accordance with fairly simple laws. Until quite recently this has also been the conception of the universe adopted by the scientist. His criterion for reality . . . was that of the Doubting Thomas: what can be seen or touched. Yet to suppose that on such a basis we can construct a complete and all-inclusive picture of the universe is like supposing that a street-plan of Rome will tell you what the Eternal City looks like when you get there.

"'Osses," said the coachman to Tom Brown, "'as to wear blinkers, so's they see only wot's in front of 'em: and that's the safest plan for 'umble folk like you and me." Nature seems to have worked on much the same principle. Our sense organs and our brain operate as an intricate kind of filter which limits and directs the mind's clairvoyant powers, so that under normal conditions attention is concentrated on just those objects or situations that are of biological importance for the survival of the organism and its

species. . . . As a rule, it would seem, the mind rejects ideas coming from another mind as the body rejects grafts coming from another body.¹⁰

Burt sums up his views by reminding us that contemporary physics recognises four types of interactions ("strong", "weak", electro-magnetic and gravitational), each of which

obeys its own laws, and so far at any rate has defeated all attempts to reduce it to any other type. This being so, there can be no antecedent improbability which forbids us postulating yet another system and yet another type of interaction, awaiting more intensive investigation—a psychic universe consisting of events or entities linked by psychic interactions, obeying laws of their own and interpenetrating the physical universe and partly overlapping, much as the various interactions already discovered and recognised overlap each other.¹¹

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The preceding section may have evoked in the reader a feeling of *déjà vu*, because earlier on (p. 82) I mentioned another type of "filter theory" related to Evolution. I am referring to the neo-Darwinian theory, according to which the hereditary substance in the germ cells is protected by an almost inviolable barrier against influences originating in the outside world. The "almost" refers to cosmic rays, noxious heat, and chemicals which might penetrate the barrier and cause mutations in the genes. Most of these are harmful, but from time to time there are lucky hits, and these, with the aid of natural