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The Need to Delineate Psychic Experiences From Psychic Events

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In his review of our book, *Mysterious Minds: The Neurobiology of Psychics, Mediums, and Other Extraordinary People*, Brian Hughes claims we first rejected the applicability of scientific methods for exploring parapsychology and then proceeded to use them anyway (i.e., in an unfair attempt to have it both ways). This is characterized as a fundamental contradiction and a fatal flaw.

In contrast, we think Hughes confuses our discussion of science, which was not meant to debunk science but to discuss some of its limitations, especially when wedded to antiquated notions (such as linear causality embedded in a Newtonian worldview). It appears that Hughes reacted to our discussion as an attack on science rather than an attack on a limited view of science (i.e., scientism as a parochial form of science that, indeed, we do reject). Hughes's closing comment reflects this misunderstanding: 'For parapsychology to progress as a science, its proponents will need to acquire higher standards of epistemology, not equipment' (para. 22).

We agree with this, but it applies equally to both parapsychology's counteradvocates as well as to some of its overzealous advocates. Unfortunately in this case, it is Hughes's epistemology, with its apparent implicit a priori rejection of the importance of studying psychic phenomena, that seems to constitute the epistemological lack. Our intent in this volume was to reconcile some of the methodological problems in research on psychic phenomena by focusing primarily on one aspect of such phenomena, namely psychic experiences, without relying on whether these experiences have external validity (i.e., in the sense of being related to putative psychic events). In this regard, we did not reject science at all but worked within the emerging tradition of neurophenomenology ([Varela, 1996](#)).

However, the importance of delineating between experiences and events, although both are related to the more general construct of psychic phenomena, appears to have eluded Hughes, as experiences per se can be accepted as a valid subject to explore scientifically, whether or not they are veridical with anything external to themselves. Our declining to defend the existence of psychic events within our volume was not disingenuous, or 'bizarre' as Hughes claimed, but rather an intentional strategy to pursue another perspective for studying parapsychological phenomena, namely the subjective experience of such events without giving or denying any credence to their possible reality or lack of reality. And we made no claims about the primacy of subjective experience over objective events, as Hughes asserted.

Therefore, the use of advanced technologies (e.g., functional magnetic resonance imaging) to research the neurobiological concomitants of psychic experiences

explicitly avoids the type of contradiction for which our book is unfortunately accused. We simply proposed a strategy to look at the research on psychic experiences while largely bracketing psychic events in the attempt to relate these extraordinary experiences to demonstrable scientific findings using advanced technologies that have only recently become readily available for such purposes.

We hoped that this approach could provide supporting evidence that something important might be happening during such experiences, whatever that might be. Positive findings from such a strategy may or may not logically support veracity to any claims of the reality of psychic events, but they surely would indicate that such experiences might be worth researching further for their own sake, as well as possibly invigorating efforts to research psychic events in new ways.

In this regard, Hughes was prematurely dismissive of our effort in claiming we gave ‘up on demonstrating the very existence of their [our] own subject matter’ (para. 1) as, again, our subject matter focused on experiences, not events. For the psychic experiences researched, we found considerable scientific evidence supporting the proposition that they are indeed worth exploring. It is unfortunate that widespread biases against the very possibility that anything related to psychic phenomena could have potential value appears to have tainted Hughes's perspective so that the central point of our book not only was misunderstood but our effort was denigrated.

Parapsychology is frequently used to exemplify muddled thinking within undergraduate psychology texts (e.g., [Wade & Travis, 2008](#)); similarly, bookstores are replete with outrageous works touting unlikely psychic claims. Perhaps both of these extremes might suffer from some common errors? In contrast, in our book we attempted to present neurobiological findings in one area of parapsychology, namely psychic experiences, in a responsible and balanced way. Regarding the supposed epistemological assumptions and other concerns that led Hughes to reject the worth of our book, we explore these in greater detail in our newest book, *Debating Psychic Experiences: Human Potential or Human Illusion?* ([Krippner & Friedman, in press](#)), in which both noted advocates and counteradvocates openly debate these important issues.

[Back to Top](#)

References

Krippner, S., & Friedman, H. (Eds.). (in press). *Debating psychic experiences: Human potential or human illusion?* Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger. [\[Context Link\]](#)

Varela, F. (1996). Neurophenomenology: A methodological remedy to the hard problem. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3, 330-350. [\[Context Link\]](#)

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