

James C. Carpenter

## First Sight. ESP and Parapsychology in Everyday Life

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Reviewed by Gerhard Mayer

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During my engagement with contemporary magicians as part of a field study (Mayer, 2008), I came across the work of a certain Lionel Snell, who, as an initiated and practicing chaos magician under various pseudonyms (Ramsey Dukes, Lemuel Johnstone, etc.), has published stimulating texts since the 1970s – first in rather obscure magazines like *Aquarian Arrow*, and then compiled in books with such strange titles as *S.S.O.T.B.M.E. – An Essay on Magic, Its Foundations, Development and Place in Modern Life* (Johnstone, 1979) or *BLAST Your Way to Megabuck\$ with my SECRET Sex-Power Formula* (Dukes, 1992). Snell knows how to brush some ingrained thought patterns against the grain with his own humor and to provoke thought. As a magician with a tendency towards philosophical trains of thought, he was particularly interested in the relationship between science and magic, whereby parapsychological research, but also media-effective performers such as Uri Geller, provided him with sufficient stimulus for problematization. This author confronted me for the first time with the idea that psychokinesis (PK) and extrasensory perception (ASW) might not be rarely shown abilities, but that they belong to the basic human equipment and are unconsciously used every day in order to exercise the highest possible control over our environment. The comparatively low level of everyday chaos and the many accidents just prevented are a consequence of this ubiquitous unconscious activity (Dukes, 1992: 73-96). This is not the place to go into Snell's original, albeit controversial, considerations in more detail,<sup>1</sup> but the book now being discussed, *First Sight. ESP and Parapsychology in Everyday Life*, by James C. Carpenter, offers a special opportunity to refer to the original British author.

Carpenter's and Snell's approaches have in common on the one hand the role they ascribe to the unconscious and on the other hand the idea that paranormal phenomena (ASW and PK or magic) occur every day and in general, i.e. not limited to gifted individuals. Another common feature is that both approaches have an observation-based but highly speculative element. However, while one may tend to see Snell's theory more as the result of creative chaos coupled with idiosyncratic logic, Carpenter's first sight theory is based on around half a century of his own experimentation in the field of parapsychological research. It also reflects the thorough reception of research findings in parapsychology, clinical psychology, perceptual psychology, and psychotherapy.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus he writes: "When the subatomic structure of matter is considered, it appears to be so insubstantial as to suggest that the real miracle is not the bending of metal by telekinesis, but rather that we are so ready to trust our lives to its not bending. Observing the extent to which human belief can shape human reality, I am tempted to suggest that the strength of metal is not so much innate, as a consequence of our Unconscious Will to preserve our own security" (Dukes, 1992: 86).

Carpenter is a clinical psychologist and has been working as a psychotherapist in private practice for over thirty years. He is also an Associate Professor in the Psychiatric Department of the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. His long and rich experience in both parapsychological research and as a practicing clinical psychologist and psychotherapist is reflected in his recent voluminous work.

After a short biographical preface, the book begins with a verbal drumbeat, with the author emphasizing the provocatively new aspects of his model in the introduction:

This book is about a radically new way of thinking about these things. It presents a revolutionary understanding of how each of us fits within the world and how we are put together within ourselves. A lot of evidence suggests that the theory is true. In light of this, much of what we normally assume will need to be changed. (pp. 2–3)

At first this seems a bit blatant, and one wonders whether it should not be a little more modest. But after reading the book one has to admit that the claim is not exaggerated. The potential readership will consist above all of parapsychological researchers, but also of scientists with a fundamental openness for an unusual interpretation of unusual research findings. Accordingly, a fundamental acceptance of the possibility of unconventional explanatory models for the various findings of parapsychological research, i.e. an acceptance of the existence of what is called "psi phenomena" in the absence of better terms, is presupposed. However, for those who meet this condition, Carpenter's 'First Sight Theory' (FST) certainly has the potential of a radical alternative to previously preferred explanatory models of such phenomena.

The name of the theory makes direct reference to the common term "second sight" for clairvoyance. If this term suggests that the associated phenomena are subordinate to 'normal' perception, the FST reverses the order: The paranormal interaction with the environment, i.e. extrasensory perception (ASW) and psychokinetic efficacy (PK), takes place *before* their conscious equivalents of 'normal' perception and 'normal' action. Hence the choice of term *first* sight. That would remain a nice speculation if Carpenter left it at that. But the author tries to justify the plausibility of the FST by means of two strategies. On the one hand, he compares findings of paranormal research with those of subliminal perception and establishes strong parallels with regard to various moderating variables (especially in Chapter 10). On the other hand, he derives hypotheses from the FST, which he sets up post hoc for parapsychological studies that have already been carried out. It is important that none of the studies used for the evaluation were designed with the FST in mind – a condition for justifying such an approach. The book then handles this in such a way that first a research area with its approaches to operationalization is briefly presented (e.g. studies on the connection between 'psi-performance' and the personality trait "extraversion"), in order to then discuss the theoretically expected results in accordance with the FST. Afterwards, an overview of the actual results will be given, which will finally be discussed in relation to the FST. In most cases, Carpenter succeeds in making reliable predictions with his model and to integrate sufficiently plausibly some findings that have remained irritatingly contradictory so far.

It would go too far to go into detail here, but an overview of the research areas and fields that the author has explored in this way is provided. In addition to chapter 10, already mentioned, on the parallels of the processing of ambiguous and subliminal sensory stimuli, studies on the connection between psi and memory (chapters 11 and 12) as well as psi and creativity (chapter 13) are discussed. Chapter 14, which is very extensive, examines the relationship between psi performance and anxiety. Also extensive is the number of studies on the relationship between psi and extraversion, which are reanalysed here in relation to FST (chapter 15). In the chapter that follows, various individual and situational factors such as the sheep-goat variable or psi-promoting settings

such as the Ganzfeld protocol are briefly discussed. Chapter 17 is devoted to two "tricky" problems, namely the so-called "experimenter effect" and the "decline effect", which have long posed a considerable challenge to parapsychology and would also cause a considerable stir beyond the boundaries of this field if they were acknowledged. In a further section of the book, the field of experimental laboratory research is abandoned, and in chapters 18 to 21 the author turns to questions of how field observations of psi can be interpreted with the model, such as the so rare awareness of the supposedly so ubiquitous existing processes, or the occurrence of talented mediums. Here Carpenter discusses Mary Craig Sinclair and Joe McMoneagle as well as the group experiments of Kenneth Batchelder and Iris Owen in more detail. He also discusses the question of psi events in the context of psychotherapeutic situations, benefiting from his own rich experience in this field. He mentions four different typical forms of psi experiences, which in classical psychoanalytical terminology are partly subsumed under the phenomena of transmission and countertransmission, but partly also fall into the area for which clinical parapsychology (Kramer, Bauer & Hövelmann, 2012) is 'responsible'.

In addition to these evaluation and application-related sections, the first 100 pages or so are dedicated to the exact theoretical description of the model, its integration into the existing research landscape and its references to other concepts important for the development of the FST. One of the latter, to name but one, is the model of Psi-Mediated Instrumental Response (PMIR) developed by Rex Stanford (1990). Stanford also sees psi as a basic anthropological function, which is used mostly on an unconscious level to react to threatening environmental situations, for example. However, Carpenter emphasizes the fundamental conceptual difference by emphasizing that Stanford's "psi-function" only appears in special (exceptional) situations (such as crisis telepathy), while with Carpenter it is permanent in action and interacts with the environment both efferently and afferently prior to subliminal and conscious awareness. Conceived in this way, psi is neither an ability nor an experience. Not the latter, since these processes are never directly accessible to consciousness and can thus become an experience, not the former, since it is an all-time fundamental life process such as digestion or brain activity itself. Against this background, the call for a radically new way of thinking, which Carpenter talks about at the beginning, becomes understandable, because he questions many common concepts. On the other hand, he also makes the field of parapsychology more accessible and digestible for conventional psychology by negating the special status of the underlying mechanisms and placing them in the system of known mechanisms of the human psyche:

First Sight theory is revolutionary because, looked at through its lenses, the findings of parapsychology are not anomalous; they are meaningfully connected with all that we know about ourselves. As the book argues in detail, we can see that psi functions smoothly among all of our mental functions – our memory, our perception, our motivation, and our creativity (p. 4).

As plausible as the arguments may sound, as impressive as the explanatory power of the model in its application to the empirical findings of parapsychological research is demonstrated – questions naturally remain unanswered and the author cannot explain all the mechanisms involved. As a basic assumption, Carpenter requires the concept that a living organism is not separated from its environment on a psychological level and that it acts in an "extended universe of meaning" (p. 17). This has a non-local quality and is understood as "of indefinite extent in space and time" (ibid.). A further basic assumption is that any experience and any intentionally controlled behavior is constituted by unconscious psychological processes that operate purposefully on the basis of the most diverse sources of information (including psi information) (p. 18). All of his deductions and subsequent propositions are based on these unproven basic assumptions, and his model stands and falls accordingly.

Another fundamental question is how to imagine a kind of preconscious decision-making authority, because Carpenter represents a teleological view of man: "First Sight theory assumes that the behavior of persons is caused by their intentions, both conscious and unconscious" (p. 43). The central position of intentionality as well as the other important characteristic closely connected with it, the switching of directionality to specific sources of meaningful information, whereby directionality can assume the forms of assimilation as well as exclusion, characterize the FST and have a special conception of man as a prerequisite, which, as Carpenter himself states, opposes the assumptions of most psychologists. According to this, environmental influences are not primarily responsible for the human – reactive – behavior, but a preconscious authority selects the sources of information found in the environment that are considered meaningful, adjusts the intentional behavior accordingly and controls the duration of the stay or the speed of the change to other sources of information. This is a strong assumption that raises many questions.

A further point worth discussing concerns the factors that make the psi function, which in principle remains preconscious, accessible to consciousness. This happens in relatively rare individual events, which Carpenter compares with the long-understood and unpredictable flashes (as weather phenomena), but also with particularly 'gifted' individuals, as he exemplarily presents in chapter 19. There he also discusses the question of the beneficial factors that can make Psi a helpful source of meaning and influence at the conscious level. He sees growing up in an environment where "such things" are believed to be true as a very important factor (p. 316). Our Western culture, which is strongly oriented towards scientific rationality, tends to stand in the way of this. That may be so, but even in cultures where hardly anyone has doubts about the reality of "such things", it is individuals, experts, who stand out from the average. This speaks at least to a certain extent against the idea of Carpenter. But that is rather a small thing. Other readers may find further or different starting points for criticism.

Despite such question marks, the FST represents an extremely stimulating alternative to common explanatory models for paranormal phenomena, and the book also offers a broad, though not comprehensive – and this was not the aim – overview of selected fields of experimental parapsychological research in the last half century. This alone makes it a worthwhile purchase that should not be missing on any bookshelf of a reader interested in parapsychology.

## References

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