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Is Precognition Paradoxical?

PRECOGNITION IS KNOWING THE future in advance, by “directly seeing” the future. Some people believe in precognition, especially people who believe in ESP, crystal auras, past lives, pyramid power, miracle cures, Elvis sightings, alien abductions, and other things you read about while waiting in line in the supermarket.

Here’s an argument, however, that precognition can’t exist, because it has paradoxical consequences. Suppose that you have a precognition that you’re going to have a car accident tomorrow. So you leave your car in the driveway all day, and no accident occurs. Now *knowing* something about the future implies that it’s going to happen; but if you know about it, you can prevent it; and if you prevent it, it doesn’t happen. So knowing something about the future in this case involves a contradiction, and is impossible. (You might remember earlier that we wondered whether God’s supposed foreknowledge of your future actions means that they’re inevitable, not really up to you to decide.)

But what looks like a more likely conclusion is just that if you do leave your car in the driveway, then it turns out that you didn’t know the future. Your “precognition” wasn’t true, so it wasn’t knowledge. (The word ‘knowledge’ can apply only to what is true.) You thought you saw the future, but you didn’t.

Beliefs about future things that you don’t prevent from happening, and that turn out true, can be genuine knowledge (provided that they are justified). So maybe precognition isn’t paradoxical after all.

The Para-Boring

GHOST-HUNTERS SOMETIMES EXPOSE THEMSELVES to danger, according to a news story.¹ A Toronto woman died recently while searching for spooks in the middle of the night, not from an attack from beyond the grave, but from trying to jump from one level of a dark building to another and missing. Sue Darroch, co-founder of the Toronto and Ontario Ghosts and Hauntings Research Society, warns ghost-hunters to check out sites during the day for rotten boards, blocked exits, etc. The Society will not take any new members during the weeks around Hallowe’en, because they want to discourage “thrill-seekers.” “What we do,” says Darroch, “is actually far more mundane and boring.”

¹ “Chasing ghosts? Put safety first.” *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] September 11, 2009: L1, L3.

The on-line catalogue of the Edmund Scientific Company, a respected and long-established supplier of scientific equipment, lists a “3-in-One Paranormal Research Instrument” for \$149 (US). This is described as an “Essential Ghost-Hunting Tool” which will “measure EMF, measure ambient temperature, and provide a source of light all with one advanced instrument. Designed exclusively for paranormal investigators, this incredible tool has everything you need to track and detect the presence of ghosts.”¹ An EMF is an Electro-Magnetic Field, given off by lighting fixtures, electric lines, and many other things.

1 <<http://scientificsonline.com/product.asp?pn=3151280&cmss=H31512-80>>.