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Comment

Uri Geller and science

Millions of viewers across Britain watching the "Dimbleby Talk-In" on BBC television last Friday evening were treated to a fascinating demonstration of what was alleged to be telepathy and psychokinesis—supposed paranormal faculties of the human mind which have excited the imagination of scientists and yet resisted experimental verification despite almost a century of laboratory studies. The young man demonstrating the phenomena, Mr Uri Geller, successfully reproduced a drawing which a production assistant had sketched and placed in a sealed envelope, made kitchen forks bend and break, and persuaded dud watches to start ticking simply by touching them. This was all done to the satisfaction of David Dimbleby, the studio audience, a two-man scientist panel and, no doubt, the vast majority of the viewing audience at home—large numbers of whom apparently later rang the BBC to say that forks had bent mysteriously on their kitchen tables.

"Uri gets Britain in a twist" was one newspaper headline the next day, commenting presumably on the nationwide fork bending. And if the Sunday papers are to be judged, Mr Geller was equally successful at a special press conference on Saturday. The science correspondent of one highly respectable newspaper reported that Geller had apparently bent one of his keys, without even touching it, and that his own scepticism about such matters had taken a nasty tumble. All this, of course, made fabulous TV material and newspaper copy, and served to launch Uri Geller into the British national consciousness in the same way that similar exposure in the United States and in his native Israel has previously achieved.

There is, however, clearly something more than a good story for journalists at issue here. If Mr Geller had appeared on the programme as a professional magician, it would have been surprising if there had been a hundredth of the fuss. Demonstrations of the kind given by Mr Geller are a feature of the repertoire of many good professional magicians. But Geller does not claim to be a magician. He states specifically that he achieves his effects by special paranormal powers. Furthermore he has convinced a number of scientists, most notably at the highly respected Stanford Research Institute, that his phenomena are more relevant to the world of parapsychology than to that of the Magic Circle (see *New Scientist*, vol 59, p 95). If this is indeed so, and Mr Geller really does bend metal with his mind, mend broken watches without tinkering with them, and do telepathy, then he must be one of the most brilliant exponents of psychic phenomena that the world has ever seen. His powers (or more precisely his ability to demonstrate them) would be of tremendous significance for the future of scientific theory and practice. On the other hand, if the phenomena demonstrated to millions of people over

television were achieved by the subtle touch of the professional magician, then it is equally important that this is made clear.

New Scientist believes that last Friday's demonstration, while fascinating, can hardly be counted as a controlled investigation. Mr Geller himself expressed awareness of this and declared that he was willing to demonstrate his powers to interested scientists. For this reason we have invited Mr Geller to demonstrate his ability to a small research committee, the composition of which will reflect the multidisciplinary approach needed in investigating phenomena outside the mainstream of orthodox science. The committee will consist of a member of the Society for Psychical Research, a research psychologist, the editor of *New Scientist* (a biologist) and one other member of the editorial staff (a physicist), a professional magician of international standing, and a journalist from an independent national newspaper. The committee has been chosen from people varying in their attitudes to extrasensory phenomena, but none of them believes that such phenomena should be discounted. It is proposed to make audio and video tape recordings of the entire proceedings and to publish a full report of the research session or sessions in *New Scientist*. Every effort will be made to ensure that arrangements for the session(s) are agreeable to Mr Geller—who has, of course, never claimed to be able to perform "to order".

It might be argued that further investigations of Geller's phenomena are superfluous, because he has already demonstrated them satisfactorily to the Stanford team, or possibly that it would be unreasonable to expect him to demonstrate them at will. Neither argument has much substance, as a satisfactory demonstration to an independent, critical group in Britain could only serve to accelerate parapsychological research by confirming Stanford's controversial findings. On the second point, Mr Geller has repeatedly been able to generate the phenomena on numerous television shows in various parts of the world, admittedly under poorly controlled conditions but under the glare of TV lights and in the tense and oppressive atmosphere of a TV studio. The vast wave of publicity which has followed his latest appearance will, of course, give a great boost to public interest in alleged paranormal powers of the mind.

However, scientific research and parapsychology, which has made at best painful progress in the last 50 years, will not be advanced one jot by demonstrations in which it is not 100 per cent certain what is being demonstrated. For this reason *New Scientist* has taken the unusual step of instigating this direct research proposal. We believe that the majority of our readers would wish us to take this step.