
A BRIEF TREATISE ON COINCIDENCE

MICHAEL A. THALBOURNE

The frequency with which people experience coincidences—in particular, meaningful and/or astounding coincidences—varies considerably from person to person, but it seems that we all experience striking coincidence at least occasionally. In a recent pilot study using a 10-item survey of attitudes towards, and experience of, coincidence¹ ($N = 24$), I presented the statement “I have experienced truly astounding coincidences”, to which 25% reported “often”, 63% “now and again”, and 13% reported “rarely”; *nobody* reported “never”. Thus, the vast majority claimed to have experienced truly astounding coincidences.

Another statement presented was “I experience many small coincidences which would probably not impress other people but which make life interesting for me”: 29% responded “strongly agree”, 58% said “agree”, while 8% were uncertain and 4% said “disagree”. So it seems that the majority of people agree (strongly or otherwise) that they have experience of at least *minor* coincidences.

A third statement was “It takes a certain vigilance of mind to see subtle coincidences.” Sixty-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed, 17% were uncertain, and the same percentage said “disagree”. Thus, the majority agreed with the statement. I suggest that a keen ability to introspect might be a part of this vigilance.

But how do people view the *causation* of coincidences, minor and major? In the same survey, other aspects of coincidence were canvassed. For example, the statement was presented, “Coincidences may be expected to occur from time to time just by chance or pure luck, and they never signify anything important or meaningful.” No one said “strongly agree”, but 33% said “agree”, 21% were uncertain, while 29% disagreed and 17% strongly

¹ Available from the author upon request.

disagreed, so that those who agreed (strongly or otherwise) with the chance explanation slightly outnumbered those who disagreed.

Another statement from the sceptical point of view was “People who report many coincidences must be reading meaning into events which are just random.” Eight percent strongly agreed with this statement, 25% agreed, 38% were uncertain, 21% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. Again, those who agreed (strongly or otherwise) somewhat outnumbered those who disagreed, but note that a large percentage—more than a third—were uncertain.

Last in the list of possible causes was the theological one: the statement presented was “I am quite sure that there might be a Divine Hand at work in what we call coincidence, whether immediately meaningful on the surface or not.” More than half the sample (58%) agreed or strongly agreed, 21% said they were uncertain—the same percentage as those who disagreed or strongly disagreed. So the majority of the sample looked favourably on the theological hypothesis.

There were a handful of other statements presented, but I shall give just one more: “Amazing coincidences may have entertainment value but should be of no interest to the serious scientist”: Just one person strongly agreed, two persons agreed, a third of the sample were uncertain, and 54% chose “disagree” or “strongly disagree”. So on balance, the majority said that the serious scientist might well take an interest in coincidence, though there may have been a bias towards pleasing the experimenter—a “serious scientist” who was obviously interested in coincidence.

The answers to the 10 items were examined to see whether they formed a reliable Attitude towards Coincidence Scale. One item (“I keep coincidences to myself”) failed to make a sufficient contribution to the Scale and thus was dropped, while the other 9 items together yielded a satisfactory Cronbach α of .81. Also administered were the Rasch

Australian Sheep-Goat Scale (Lange & Thalbourne, 2002) and the Rasch Mystical Experience Scale (Lange & Thalbourne, in progress). People with positive attitudes towards, and experience of, coincidence, were much more likely to believe in, and allege, experience of the paranormal ($r = .72, p < .001$), which I think makes sense; and, less obviously, they were also more likely to be mystical experiencers ($r = .45, p = .026$). But these latter two attributes correlate quite strongly ($r = .66, p < .001$), and the statistical technique of multiple regression showed that, after taking into account the sheep-goat variable, the mysticism variable contributed nothing further in its own right to attitude towards coincidence, contrary to my initial expectation.

As we have seen above, the question of whether coincidences are due solely to chance divides the population into two nearly equal parts, yeah or nay. One of the problems with considering coincidences to be due to anything *other* than chance is the so-called “egocentricity” bias (Falk, 1989): while people consider their own coincidences to be surprising and worthy of note, other people hearing of those self-same coincidences tend to be dismissive and, for example, to accord them a high probability of occurring by chance. This was one of the main findings I came up with in an extensive study of the way in which people evaluate *other peoples’* coincidences (Thalbourne, submitted).

Ever since that finding I have been more reluctant to share my own personal coincidences with other people. But not completely reluctant, because I believe that the rather large number of coincidences that I experience on a day-to-day basis is too great to be the result of chance, no matter what other people may say. However, to give the reader a taste of the sort of life I experience vis-à-vis coincidences I will give the following three examples.

It was just after 6:00 p.m. on Thursday April 21st, 2005 and I was deeply immersed in Liddell and Scott’s (1889) *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. In particular I was studying the preposition ΠΡΟ (i.e., PRO) to see whether it could mean “on behalf of”. I

scoured the two-thirds of a column devoted to this preposition, but could not find the meaning I wanted. I had to give up at that point, because at 6:30 I was to go out to a fast food restaurant with a friend, for dinner.

Less than half an hour later, when we were at the restaurant, there passed by our table a young lad in soccer gear: on his shirt were the words, in Greek, ΑΣΠΙΣ ΠΙΠΟΝΟΙΑ (ASPIS PRONOIA). I for my part was astonished that he should be wearing, in Greek, even though as part of a longer word, the preposition ΠΙΠΟ. I knew that ΠΙΠΟΝΟΙΑ was a compound word made up of that preposition ΠΙΠΟ plus ΝΟΙΑ (from ΝΟΕΕΙΝ, to perceive), meaning something like “forethought”. (However, I was unfamiliar with the word ΑΣΠΙΣ, and I asked the boy what it meant, but he didn’t know. When I got home, I looked it up and discovered that it meant “a body of soldiers”. So the soccer shirt meant something like “a body of soldiers with forethought.”)

It seemed to me that the coincidence of having two quite unrelated instances of the Greek word ΠΙΠΟ within half an hour of each other was highly unlikely to occur by chance. I’d never seen the boy before, and have never seen him since, nor have I seen this Greek phrase (or any other Greek words) on another soccer shirt. However, those around me with whom I shared the coincidence dismissed it as chance (as perhaps the reader will too!) But the egocentric bias is strong for the experient of a coincidence as well as for the people to whom it is told. Thus, I continue to regard the coincidence (and many that I’ve experienced since) as being more than chance. I will give just two additional ones that I think are more than mere coincidence.

On Saturday, December 11th, 2004, my family and I were gathered at the flat of my youngest brother to celebrate his 42nd birthday. Two coincidences occurred to me that day. First of all, my brother possesses a CD of the composer Monteverdi which he himself never plays but which he good-heartedly loans to me now and again. I spoke aloud the name of the

composer, Monteverdi. I was misheard, and was asked “Verdi”? I said, “No. Claudio *Monteverdi*.” But the question got me thinking, “What is Verdi’s first name? Is it Giuseppe?” I resolved to check my *Webster’s Biographical Dictionary* when I got home. Yes, p. 1515 reveals that his name was indeed Giuseppe. The coincidence occurred a little later when I was watching the evening news, and a man was interviewed whose first name was given at the bottom of the screen as Giueseppe. (I in fact wondered if the station had spelt the name Giuseppe incorrectly.)

The second coincidence involved my father telling a joke about George W. Bush wanting to get into Heaven to talk with Moses. Bush tried several times, but on each occasion Moses told St. Peter to send him away. Finally, Moses said “The last time I talked with a bush I ended up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years!” That evening, just after 8:30, I was watching a commercial station on which there was a movie called *For Richer or Poorer* with Tim Allen in it as an entrepreneur engaged in setting up theme parks. The character revealed his latest theme park inspiration, which he called “Holy Land”, and pointed out a bush “which bursts into flame every hour”. I know for a fact that my father was unacquainted with the movie and so he had no idea that the theme of the burning bush was to arise later that evening.

It is interesting to me that when I told my father about what I’d seen and heard on TV that very night, sceptic that he was, his reaction was one of dogged silence, and certainly *not* the cry “How amazing!”, as he battled his cognitive dissonance. If he said nothing about the coincidence it would go away, I think he figured². I’m sure that if pressed, he would put it down to chance.

² After I wrote this statement I came across a concordant thought: “. . . as forgetfulness of uncomfortable facts is part of human nature. . .” (Houtkooper, 2004, p. 189).

However, chance is not the only normal alternative to a paranormal explanation, and one about which we must be exceedingly careful is called “the hidden cause”. Caroline Watt (1990-1991) gives an example of the operation of hidden cause in the following quote:

A coincidence is not surprising if we discover a simple reason for it. But other surprising coincidences can have perfectly straightforward hidden causes, which we have just not yet discovered. For instance, imagine a case where a woman wakes up from a nightmare in which President Gorbachev is attacked in a coup. She thinks nothing more of it, until she sees from the headlines in the following morning’s newspaper that this actually happened. On first inspection this could be a meaningful coincidence, suggesting that in her dream she gained information through precognition or clairvoyance. However, when various members of the family are interviewed, it emerges that she went off early to bed the night before. The rest of the family watched the 10 o’clock news in an adjoining room, and although the woman was asleep, the news could be heard in her room. Even though she did not consciously hear the newsflash announcing the coup, this information may have been subconsciously registered, triggering the nightmare. Thus, further investigation of this coincidence between the contents of a dream and a recent news item revealed a possible hidden cause that made the coincidence less surprising. (p. 67).

I believe that Watt’s is a made-up example, but I have a very good instance of the genre from real life.

On Saturday, June 25th, 2005, at about 2 o’clock, I was walking in a southerly direction along a main street in Adelaide towards my club, and at a certain intersection I

suddenly and for no particular reason started thinking of line 14 of John Keat's sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer":

"Then felt I like. . .stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—

→Silent upon a peak in Darien."

I had quoted these lines under the entry "'Peak in Darien' Case" in my *Glossary* (Thalbourne, 2003, p. 85), but I remembered clearly just the final line: "Silent upon a peak in Darien".

About 15 minutes later I arrived at my club, and went into one of the TV rooms to eat my lunch. There was a low table there at whose design I'd never *consciously* looked; indeed, it was often partially covered with newspapers). But for some reason I looked at it more closely on this occasion, and it turned out that the table-top was an old-style map of Central America. And would you believe, one of the parts of this geographical map was labelled "Darien"! (Other parts were labelled Reino de Tierra Firme, and Provincia de, but they are just part of the authenticity of the map.) I was initially extremely impressed by my coincidence.

However, in this case there is an alternative, "hidden cause" explanation to that of unusual, anomalous perception: I had been in that room on a *number* of previous occasions, and it is thus quite possible that I'd *unconsciously* registered the name Darien, perhaps by the process of subliminal perception, and the name "Darien" popped up as an association when I was on my way to that table.³

³ I cannot resist recounting a more recent coincidence that does not have this explanation and which is, I think, a genuine if perhaps minor anomaly which makes up in part for losing the

A similar hidden cause situation may have occurred just recently, on Saturday November 26th, 2005: I was reading a book, and within an hour, experienced no less than four distinct coincidences between the text and the external world. The book was John Hospers' (1967) *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*. I wanted to read the chapter on causation, to see whether Hospers raises the objection to Mill's account of cause as sufficient condition that it led to an infinite regress of causes. (In fact, as I found, he does *not* raise this objection.) I will recount these four coincidences, but I must first reveal to the reader that *I had already read this chapter at least twice before*, at times separated by several years, though *my conscious recollection* in 2005 of its contents was nevertheless very poor—hence the necessity to re-read it. It will be argued by some that the “coincidences” that arose were caused by the subconscious memory of their being mentioned in this book: given that I'd determined, that Saturday morning, to read Hospers, unconscious memories of what I'd previously read in Hospers came back with a vengeance. We will review the coincidences and see whether this is a plausible hypothesis:

(1) In the hour prior to reading the book, I had an unaccustomed fantasy (perhaps because, uncharacteristically, I had a largish sum of money at home at the time) of a robber more striking Darien one: on New Year's Eve, 2005, I was again walking to my club. At a certain point, and again, “out of the blue”, I remembered a scene from Colleen McCullough's (2002) book *The October Horse* in which (on page 474) the boy Caesarion, whose mother was Cleopatra and whose father was Julius Caesar, beholds Caesar for the first time and asks his mother, “That's my tata?” “Tata” is the Latin word for “Daddy”, and it is used three times in this passage. A few hours later I was at my club and was watching a wildlife documentary on TV. At one point they refer to the “Ta-ta lizard”, so called because it waves its hand like someone saying goodbye (i.e., “Ta-ta!”) I had never seen this documentary before. Note that here the coincidence is phonetic rather than semantic.

breaking in and demanding all my money, and in my fantasy I gave him all the money out of my wallet, but not the hidden stash of money in my bedroom. Very shortly after this reverie, on p. 267, Hospers writes of a situation “such as a robber forcing you to give up your money”. Subconscious memory expressing itself as a fantasy? It seems possible.

(2) On p. 281, Hospers writes, “It simply *must* be nice weather for tomorrow’s picnic.” In fact, at that time, there *was*, in my life, a picnic happening “tomorrow”, at a place in the Adelaide Parklands, and the weather *was* at the time uncertain. Perhaps it can be argued that my general awareness of the upcoming picnic encouraged me all the more to read Hospers because at some level I remembered that he had mentioned a picnic and the weather.

(3) I switch on the overhead light, and on the next page (p. 297, possibly available to peripheral vision) it says, “If I push a button and a light goes on. . .”. It is surprising how much of a page we take in incidentally, and certain information not in the line of sight can act as a “hidden” cause. Alternatively, I decided to switch on the light at that point because I (subconsciously) knew that a reference to turning on the light was coming up.

And finally, in this apparently fruitful source of coincidences: (4) I was, at the time, concerned about my haemolytic anemia, in which my oxygen-carrying red blood cells were being destroyed at an abnormal rate, and Hospers writes, a bit chillingly, “the cause of his death is deprivation of oxygen to his blood-cells.” (p. 301) Again, conscious concern about the anemia perhaps dredged up a subconscious memory of this statement about oxygen-deprivation, and that memory is the hidden cause of the correspondence with Hospers.

Thus, in just about every case, if we admit that the unconscious can store some remarkably detailed information for a long time and present it to consciousness in a timely fashion, we have little need to invoke paranormal coincidence. The phenomenon would probably be called “cryptomnesia”—a “[t]erm coined by Theodore Flournoy to refer to a memory of some event or experience which has been forgotten by the conscious mind, and

which may appear in awareness without the person recognizing it as a memory. . .” (Thalbourne, 2003, p. 25). It thus may be preferable to attribute the Hospers coincidences to an enormously detailed and accurate unconscious rather than to some more anomalous factor.

No such explanation seems to be forthcoming in the case of the three coincidences concerning the Greek preposition ΠΙΠΟ, the Italian name Giuseppe, and the burning bush. A sceptical outlook would probably try to invoke chance in these cases rather than hidden cause. My response to such scepticism is that it tends to be unfalsifiable: the sceptic never lays out the kind of evidence they *would* accept that this was *not* chance. Instead they treat chance as a bottomless pit, able to swallow up each and every coincidence that does not already have a normal explanation. But, as I think I have demonstrated, we must be ever-cautious about the coincidences that we do evaluate as paranormal.

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