

Clearing the Air about Psi

The Amazing Randi corrects some statements often made in the media that misrepresent his position on the paranormal.

James Randi

If a teacher cannot learn from the experience of exchanging ideas with those being taught, a great opportunity has been lost. Over the past decade, during which I have been active as a lecturer on the subject of the paranormal, certain comments and queries presented during question-and-answer periods have provided me with an improved and extended insight into the general audience attitude toward the subject.

Some responses leave the speaker in a state of shock. After some 90 minutes of pressing home the contention that the evidence for claims of paranormal forces is not sufficient to be convincing, I am asked if I will make some psychic predictions or if I can provide a few "lucky numbers" for the questioner. It is at such times that one wonders if the effort is worth it, though the majority of the audience happily is not in tune with these exceptional few who ask such inane favors of me.

What really troubles me about audience comprehension of my lectures is that I am frequently misquoted in the press following my appearance, and I find myself required to answer volumes of mail that result from statements attributed to me but which I would never make. Here are a few examples, directly from various media sources:

"Mr. Randi denies the possibility of ESP powers and equates them with belief in Santa Claus." My stand has always been, not that ESP cannot exist, but that it is unlikely to a high degree in view of what we know about all possible forces that may be invoked to provide a theoretical basis for it. Of much greater importance, however, is the second part of my contention: that evidence offered to support belief in ESP is abundant but of very poor quality. Rome's Seneca said it well: "It is the quality rather

than the quantity that matters.” I frequently ask a believer in psychic matters whether he/she believes as well in the reality of Santa Claus (thus the reference quoted) and when met with a positive “No!” I ask, “Why not?” Few come up with the obvious answer: “Because the *evidence* for Santa Claus is very poor, though plentiful.”

“Pseudoscientists are those who think they have found meteorites [opposed by] men who knew damned well that there were no meteorites.” (This was written by a journalist seeking to summarize the attitude of both CSICOP and myself.) In my lecture, I gladly introduce the meteorites-and-X-rays matter to show that a denial of the *possibility* of any claim is not only unwise but illogical. One can only express a degree of probability of any event or entity, though that degree may approach zero *very* closely. As for the meteorite/X-ray examples, it is easy to point out that meteorites are produced for examination and are seen to fall, and that X-rays are reproducible easily and consistently—while the parapsychologists are still, contrary to various claims they have made, trying to come up with the repeatable experiment they need to make the field a science.

“Randi . . . claimed that because [his replication of a “psychic” trick] was a fake, all similar performances must be fakes.” This, and like statements about my claim concerning my demonstrations, is just not so. What my performances prove is that so-called psychic feats can easily be faked and can be thoroughly convincing to anyone not familiar with conjuring techniques. I specifically state that duplication of such feats does not prove that “psychics” do them that way, but I also insist that the parapsychologists have the onus upon them to prove that what they observe is not trickery but genuine paranormal forces at work. This they cannot do if they do not consult with an *experienced* conjuror, rather than one who occasionally graces a family soiree with his card tricks.

“Randi is of the school of thought that holds [parapsychologists] are a bunch of sneaks, cheats and liars.” I have *never* said any such thing, nor would I. The majority of the psientists I have met are honest but, in my opinion, deluded. Two gentlemen for whom I have the highest regard are Robert Morris of Syracuse University and Helmut Schmidt of the Mind Science Foundation in San Antonio. Though I have never seen these scientists at work—something I look forward to—I have examined their work and found that they appear to be directing their efforts toward an honest and thorough examination of the psi phenomena they believe they have observed. One cannot ask more of a scientist. However, there is no question at all about one of my consistently held and provable contentions: *some* parapsychologists have fudged data and have lied and cheated in order to make their results look significant. In this, parapsychology is little different from other branches of study, for such practices are not unknown outside of the psi field. It is this small fraction of psientists that I pursue, along with the performers who confuse the study by using trickery. I also

try to identify subconscious sources of bias that lead to self-delusion.

"[Randi] would not believe anything of a paranormal nature, no matter how convincing and positive the evidence." Absolutely not true. As a rational individual, I must accept the evidence if it is properly arrived at and correctly reported. When I was recently told that Arthur Lintgen, a physician in Abington, Pennsylvania, could identify a classical record by simply examining the surface with the labels and matrix numbers covered,



Randi: Rectifying the errors may help the exchange of ideas.

I very much doubted the claim. I realized, of course, that the information required was available in a close examination of the grooves, but I knew that it would require a great deal of training to perform Lintgen's claimed feat, though he was not saying it was at all psychic. I tested him using double-blind techniques and allowing no feedback of information. Lintgen made no attempt to bypass the security I imposed, nor did he offer lame excuses—a common pair of features exhibited almost without exception when I test "psychics." The good doctor passed my test 100 percent, identifying two different copies of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," the 1812 Overture of Tchaikovsky, Ravel's "Bolero," Beethoven's Sixth Symphony with an added "Prometheus" Overture, Holst's "The Planets" and effectively eliminating three additional controls that I worked into the test. One of them he described as "gibberish." It was an Alice Cooper recording. I had no difficulty at all accepting that Dr. Lintgen can do *exactly* what he says he can do. And I am prepared to do the same with any demonstration of ESP, PK, divining, or other wonder. Just *show me*.

"Randi makes all the rules, acts as the judge and runs the whole show when he offers [his] unattainable prize." Nonsense. This comment, referring to my \$10,000 prize for the performance of a psychic

demonstration under proper observing conditions, is typical of those who are uninformed of the facts. All conditions are agreed to in advance by both parties, claims are clearly set out in advance, judges (where needed) are agreed upon, and the \$10,000 check is surrendered to an impartial party before the test, either to be returned to me at the conclusion or given to the claimant if the test is a success. (A copy of the official offer, notarized, is available free to anyone who sends a stamped, self-addressed envelope to me. This offer is not made on behalf of CSICOP or the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.)

There are, of course, many other false attributions that I might correct or deny altogether. Facing up to them is part of the job; it comes with the territory. Perhaps, in rectifying a few of the errors made by my detractors, I may look forward to a more productive exchange of ideas and opinions with opponents. In common with serious believers in the paranormal, the occult, and the supernatural, I seek truth. That statement is, I'm sure, echoed by CSICOP itself. Einstein said it: "No amount of experimentation can prove me right. But one experiment can prove me wrong." I await that one experiment. ●

Debunking as Positive Science

The popular impression that disproof represents a negative side of science arises from a common, but erroneous, view of history. The idea of unilinear progress . . . suggests a false concept of how science develops. In this view, any science begins in the nothingness of ignorance and moves toward truth by gathering more and more information, constructing theories as facts accumulate. In such a world, debunking would be primarily negative, for it would only shuck some rotten apples from the barrel of accumulating knowledge. But the barrel of theory is always full; sciences work with elaborated contexts for explaining facts from the very outset Science advances primarily by replacement, not by addition. If the barrel is always full, then the rotten apples must be discarded before better ones can be added. Scientists do not debunk only to cleanse and purge. They refute older ideas in the light of a different view about the nature of things.

—Stephen Jay Gould, in *The Mismeasure of Man*
(W.W. Norton, 1981)

A Skotography Scam Exposed

A case of filmy flim-flam

James Randi

I received a frantic phone call, back in the summer of 1964, from an old family friend living in New York City. His brother, identified here as "B," had fallen victim to a spiritualist "church" operated by Mr. and Mrs. William Donnelly in the town of North Oxford, Connecticut, and there was concern that he was being taken for a financial ride by the operators. I was asked if I could convince B that he was being swindled. (I relate this event now, since the complete file and set of photos has just been made available by B, and he has provided additional details unknown to me until this time.)

The gimmick that was being used is known as "skotography," a process by which purported spirit photos are produced on paper, cloth, or film by supposedly supernatural means. In this particular case, the modus operandi was childishly simple but still had managed to deceive the believers, many of whom were regulars at the Riverside Church in Manhattan, though that organization had nothing at all to do with the racket I was investigating.

B described the skotography procedure as follows: The lights in the seance room were turned out, and a yellow safelight (the kind used in a darkroom for handling photographic paper without exposing it) was turned on. There were three trays of chemicals on the table before the sitters—developer, fixer, and wash water. Each sitter was handed a two-inch square of enlarging paper (in this case, it was "Indiatone" pebble-surfaced paper) that appeared quite blank. After much praying and concentration on the square, which the sitters held between their palms, they were told to immerse their squares in the three chemical baths in order. A face was then seen to develop on each square. After all present had obtained a photo, the lights were restored.