A Critical Guide to Parapsychology


Susan Blackmore

WHEN YOU BUY A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology, don't just leave it standing impressively on its shelf "for reference." It is certainly a big and weighty book; more than 700 pages, including thirty chapters, by psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, statisticians, magicians, and professional parapsychologists. But it is not dull. I even found myself keeping my copy by my bed! Many of the chapters are eminently readable, and the whole book provides a fascinating, if necessarily one-sided, insight into the problems of parapsychology.

The book is in six sections, starting with historical overviews. The very first chapter, by Ray Hyman, is undoubtedly the best. With examples from every period of psychical research, he shows how both the proponents of the paranormal, and their critics, have fallen prey to a False Dichotomy; when an investigator concludes that some phenomenon is real then everyone assumes that either his conclusion is justified or he is incompetent, gullible, or deficient in some other way. Hyman's argument is that there are many more alternatives and that a far higher standard of criticism is needed to explore them. He also suggests that many parapsychologists have probably assumed that their database was of much higher quality than it actually was, until recent more constructive criticisms were made—and Hyman's meticulous criticisms have certainly given me some unpleasant surprises.

Next, the well-known critic C. E. M. Hansel discusses the search for a demonstration of ESP, selecting a few important experiments, such as Sargent's recent ganzfeld research, and listing numerous weaknesses—some valid and some certainly not—in their designs. He concludes that in 100 years of research there have been a high incidence of trickery and a long history of inept (and not improving) experimentation; no repeatable demonstration has been forthcoming, and results have been reported and confirmed at low levels of confidence. Edward and Ellen Girden discuss fifty years of research into psychokinesis, or PK; coming to the Scottish verdict of "not proven."

I especially enjoyed two reprinted articles. Simon Newcomb, first president of the American Society for Psychical Research, wrote "Modern Occultism" in 1909. In response to the spiritualistic beliefs of eminent men like Sir Oliver Lodge and Professor William Barrett, Newcomb showed how people can form erroneous beliefs and be misled by coincidences; how memory can distort events; and how stories grow from nothing. His comments on the problem of unrepeatability are uncannily relevant nearly 80 years later, and it is rather disturbing to see how long people have been making the same points with apparently no effect. His final comment concerning research into thought-transference might have been made by most of the contributors writing today: "Possibly you may succeed, but the more pains you take to avoid all

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sources of error, the less likely success will be" (p. 153).

Writing little more than 15 years ago, another veteran of psychical research, Eric Dingwall, gives an outrageously skeptical view of his 60 years in the subject. He has some delightful tales of deception and ineptitude to tell and states his conclusions more bluntly than most. "I no longer believe the stories I read" (p. 162), he says. "I do not intend to waste any more time over the hoaxes and fictional reports put out by parapsychologists" (p. 174).

Part 2 deals with the argument from fraud, an issue that recurs throughout the book. Here Paul Kurtz begins with cases of fraud among spiritualists, mediums, and psychics. Included are discussions of the Fox sisters, D. D. Home, Eusapia Palladino, and Uri Geller. Kurtz discusses how easily scientists have been, and still are, deceived.

Coover's 1927 article on the same topic is reprinted, with marvelous accounts of the feats of early mediums and the totally contradictory descriptions that honest observers gave of the same events. He also tackles the claim (heard often enough even today) that D. D. Home was never publicly caught cheating. Maybe not, but the firsthand accounts given here of séances with Home suggest that his unmasking came terribly close.

Two fascinating "confessions" are included. First there is Margaret Fox's 1888 explanation of how she and her sisters learned to click their toe joints to produce the raps upon which spiritualism was founded. What began as a childish prank soon got out of control and in the end, so Margaret suggests, ruined their own lives and deceived many others. I have read numerous arguments that this confession should be ignored, but to me Margaret's words have more than the ring of truth—they make the whole sad story plausible.

Second is the confession of Douglas Blackburn, whose experiments with G. A. Smith convinced many early psychical researchers of telepathy even though the results were, according to Blackburn writing in 1911, dependent on the use of codes. These heartfelt confessions show how easily even children can deceive their elders; how much pressure can be put on them by the will to believe of some investigators; and finally how very difficult it is for them to undo the deception, even with the best intentions. Some similar accounts are given in J. Fraser Nicol's discussion of fraudulent children in psychical research; and there is an account of the haunting of Borley Rectory by Trevor Hall.

The rather different issue of fraud by experimenters is dealt with in Betty Markwick's account of the establishment of data manipulation in the Soal-Shackleton experiments and in D. Scott Rogo's account of J. B. Rhine and the Levy scandal. The two are totally different. Markwick painstakingly recounts the entire fascinating story of the 30 years it took to get to the bottom of Soal's "success." She details the early speculations and the hard work and false leads involved in checking them, and the resistance of many parapsychologists to admitting that Soal cheated, until the final, overwhelming evidence was collected by Markwick herself. This, for me, raises a real problem for parapsychology. If it can take 30 years and persistent hard work to discredit one fraudulent researcher, the advantage remains always with the proponent.

By contrast, Rogo's chapter, though also a fascinating story, depends heavily on gossip and hearsay. He recounts how Rhine's most promising star researcher was suspected of fraud and finally caught red-handed. The story does not reflect well on Rhine's handling of the case, nor on the way he put constant pressure on his researchers to produce significant results; and it shows up the totally inadequate precautions taken at Rhine's laboratory during the early 1970s. Nevertheless, one is
hard pushed to know how much is agreed fact and how much Rogo's speculation.

The section on fraud ends with two chapters on magicians, conjurers, and psi. James Randi is typically entertaining but is quite unfair in treating all parapsychologists as some kind of unitary breed to be laughed at. However, he certainly makes his case that expert advice from conjurers is freely available and that scientists should not feel it a reflection on their competence to admit that they need it. Martin Gardner's article on this issue specifically criticizes one by Harry Collins from New Scientist; it would have been more interesting if Collins's original article had also been reprinted.

Part 3 is misleadingly entitled "Parapsychologists Reply." I say it is misleading not because the authors (Beloff, Stokes, Blackmore, and Hövelmann) aren't parapsychologists but because I can see no need for separating them out in this way when there are plenty of other parapsychologists writing elsewhere in the book; and because none of these papers was ever intended as a reply." They would have been far better included elsewhere and perhaps some real "replies" solicited.

John Beloff begins by asking "What is your counter-explanation? A plea to skeptics to think again." He suggests that whenever we are confronted with a paranormal claim we should ask ourselves what normal explanation would suffice to account for the evidence and then ask whether this is more or less plausible than the original paranormal claim. Naturally this will vary with one's prior beliefs but will, Beloff argues, at least sharpen the controversy. To my surprise he uses Eusapia Palladino as an example and left me (after reading the rest of this book too) almost convinced that a normal explanation would do. However, I take his point that both options are open and rational and that, for him, the believer's position requires less intellectual contortion.

Douglas Stokes next discusses parapsychology and its critics. His review of the literature is heavy going and necessarily too brief to stand as anything other than a personal selection. But I liked his discussion of the ways in which people try to avoid the cognitive dissonance evoked by both belief and disbelief in psi. He also made the point that parapsychology may be becoming methodologically isolated from the rest of science, which would finally render it a true pseudoscience rather than the proto-science it claims to be.

In my own chapter, "The Adventures of a Psi-Inhibitory Experimenter," I outlined the ten years of negative research in parapsychology that led me to face up to the problem of unrepeatability, and the stagnant research program that the psi hypothesis has generated. I suggested that parapsychology could solve most of its problems by abandoning the psi hypothesis in favor of concentrating on the phenomena themselves.

This section closes with an annotated bibliography of skeptical literature on parapsychology by Gerd Hövelmann with some additional comments by Hyman. In its concise introduction Hövelmann points out the wide range of types of skepticism and the inadequacy of dividing people into two camps. It is then particularly irritating to find the chapter given a kind of editorial disclaimer in which everyone is identified as either in one camp or the other, or both! I found the bibliography especially useful in giving not only important books and articles, but all the reviews, criticisms, and responses to them, which often go unnoticed.

Part 4 is called "Parapsychology: Science or Pseudoscience." First Christopher Scott explains why, in his opinion, parapsychology demands a skeptical response: because of nonrepeatability, the absence of any properties for psi, and the correlation between results and the experimenter—all of which seem to suggest that parapsy-
chologists are mystery mongers rather than problem solvers. But Scott is most unfair in his criticism (which he has made before and been challenged on before) that parapsychologists do not investigate the modus operandi of psi. They do. They call it process-oriented research, and even in this volume it is frequently mentioned. The lack of progress is certainly not for want of trying!

Paul Kurtz next asks the problematic question, "Is parapsychology a science?" By implication his answer is no, but largely on the grounds of unrepeatability—a problem long recognized within parapsychology and to which he contributes little that is new. He constantly divides people into skeptics and believers and seems to assume that all parapsychologists believe in psi and that all believers are dualists, which does nothing to clarify the question. In the end, I fear he fails to answer it.

Antony Flew tackles much the same question, starting with the important point that parapsychology is nothing like other obvious pseudosciences with which CSICOP has to deal. By contrast, it does make a case to answer. However, until there is a repeatable experiment, parapsychology will at best be preparing for some future "science."

James Alcock discusses parapsychology as a "spiritual" science. He makes two thought-provoking points: first, that the driving force behind the research has always been a spiritual quest rather than one motivated by anomalous observations occurring in normal science. Physicists who find anomalies never turn to parapsychologists for help! Second, he traces the urge to understand human spiritual potential and shows how parapsychology has totally failed to fulfill it.

Part 5 considers methodological and theoretical issues. Refreshingly, Persi Diaconis begins by pointing out that skeptics also make mistakes! He describes several experiments he witnessed at firsthand and shows how difficult it is to judge experiments from their written accounts: The problems are uncovered only by people who actually watch them, and of course one cannot watch every experiment. Denys Parsons describes some "detective work in parapsychology," giving examples in which his persistence, writing numerous letters, and visiting people and places finally allowed the "mysteries" to be solved. The work involved is skilled and tedious, and most laymen do not know how to do it.

Martin Gardner's chapter helps dispel some of the mystification of quantum mechanics and psi. He analyzes Evan Harris Walker's theories of psi, explaining exactly where Walker takes great leaps from accepted physical principles. He says, "To readers unfamiliar with QM, Walker's papers seem enormously impressive because they swarm with equations and scientific jargon that only a physicist could understand. But when it is all translated and you discover exactly what he is saying, his 'theory' turns out to be only a collection of pious hopes" (p. 594).

Charles Akers asks, "Can meta-analysis resolve the ESP controversy?" This is a genuinely helpful contribution for people struggling to understand the techniques of evaluating whole research areas or to be fair to the conclusions of (for example) Hyman and Honorton over the ganzfeld controversy. He explores the value of meta-analysis and details its limitations, especially when it is applied to old data over which there is irresoluble disagreement. He concludes that attention should shift toward designing better experiments whose results should then be amenable to meta-analysis.

The last part includes three further critiques. Piet Hein Hoebens reflects on psychic sleuths. He gives many examples of spectacular claims that psychics helped the police by ESP, all of which later succumbed to normal explanations. He adds that, contrary to what many skeptics believe, there are several unexplained cases,
and many police who are satisfied with the psychics' help.

Hövelmann next considers the evidence for survival from near-death experiences. After a thorough review of the literature, he lists various nonsurvivalist explanations. While arguing that the survivalists have failed to provide a good case, he emphasizes the importance of studying the experiences themselves.

Finally, Leonard Zusne contrasts magical and scientific thinking, tracing the development of both types of thought in children and adults and concluding that parapsychology is largely based on magical thinking. However, he seems to imply that all science is truly rational and all parapsychology "magical." He also ignores the parapsychologists who make genuine attempts to apply scientific rationality to apparently paranormal events.

It is impossible to review this enormous book as a whole, but it is worth considering some recurring themes. One is the way in which people have been motivated by a quest for spiritual understanding. In many different ways we see how psychical research and parapsychology have sprung from a belief in dualism, a search for the afterlife, or an honest desire to make a science of man’s spiritual nature. In all these quests parapsychology has sadly failed, and this book clearly shows how. But Alcock is almost alone in respecting the quest, even while criticizing its results so far. One day we may well have a spiritual science and come far closer to understanding human nature than we are today, and skeptics could lead the way rather than scoffing at the ideal!

Another recurring theme is the human tendency to be certain one is right and to want to give the final word on everything. Here we have what seem to be "final words" on Borley, remote viewing, the Levy scandal, and much more. Only Markwick's analysis of the Soal case really comes even close. And really this book should be able to teach us that there will never be final words on most of these stories. There will always be people who choose to believe—against all odds—in some fanciful explanation, and people who wish to prove them wrong.

There are also the recurrent problems, such as fraud, which will always be with us. Several of the contributions help us to understand how and why people cheat and how readily their deceptions are encouraged, but they do not help us to eradicate fraud in the future. Then there is the problem of repeatability, recognized since the beginning of psychical research and still agonized over today.

I suppose it all amounts to the fact that little has changed in such a very long time. One of the things I liked best about this book was the reprints of early articles alongside the modern ones. Sixty years ago Coover exposed the "fagot theory" as fallacious and yet Hyman, today, has to point it out again, with respect to Honorton's accumulation of lots of individually flawed experiments. Coover even comes close to Hyman's "False Dichotomy" when he says, "An eminent scientist may be wrong in his observations, even repeatedly wrong, as Crookes certainly was, without being 'either a knave or a fool!'" (p. 264); and from a different perspective James Randi makes a similar point with respect to conjuring. People who think they are intelligent, well-educated, and good observers believe that anything they cannot understand must be supernatural.

So nothing much has changed. And we should ask ourselves why. Is it because parapsychologists are "knaves or fools," because the critics are unfair, or because the problem is too intractable? I don't know. I can only suggest that the best lesson we can learn from this book is that we need much better skeptical approaches. Here many of the contributors would agree with me; though some seem hopeful that such progress is already with us, others are more pessimistic. However, this book must be
a step in the right direction. It is totally biased against belief in psi, but then it
doesn't proclaim anything else; and after all B. B. Wolman's *Handbook of Parapsy-
chology* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977), includes very little in the way of critical
comment. What will be best is when we don't need two handbooks and separate
journals but can argue the issues out together.

*Although she is one of the contributors to this volume, we invited Dr. Blackmore to
be our reviewer because of her experience and insights as a respected and fair-
minded researcher in, and observer of, parapsychology.*—ED.

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**Some Recent Books**

Listing here does not preclude a more detailed review in a future issue.

Gardner, Martin, ed. *The Wreck of the Titanic Foretold?* Prometheus Books,
Buffalo, 1986. 157 pp., cloth. $18.95. Reproduces several writings that seem to
foretell the sinking of the *Titanic* and leads reader to see the "familiar blend of
unreliable anecdotes with coincidences of the sort that are well within the bounds
of normal laws of chance." Gardner's introduction is succinct essay on chance,
coincidence, and human misperceptions of both.

Winchell, Wallace William. *Popping Cult Balloons.* Apollo Books, Inc., 107 LaFA-
yette, Winona, MN, 55987, 1985. 70 pp., paper, $4.00. Short satire of cults,
designed to encourage those caught up in them to "do yourself the grandest
favor of all. Break loose."

—K.F.

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**Articles of Note**

sion of "one of the present requirements of the education system—the preventa-
tive treatment of the pseudosciences."

Finke, Ronald A. "Mental Imagery and the Visual System." *Scientific American*
(March 1986): 88–95. Explores relation between mental imagery and visual per-
ception. Finds that the two share many of the same neural processes in the
human visual system.

Oppenheim, Janet. "Physics and Psychic Research in Victorian and Edwardian
public fascination with spiritualism and psychic phenomena." when many British