

In Praise of Ray Hyman

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The following remarks about Ray Hyman were delivered by York University psychology professor and CSICOP Executive Council member James Alcock in presenting Hyman the In Praise of Reason Award, CSICOP's highest honor, at the Saturday night awards banquet at the CSICOP Albuquerque conference "Hoaxes, Myths, and Manias" Oct. 23–26, 2003.

I imagine, if you will, the following scenario—admittedly an unlikely one.

- A new super-psychic has burst onto the world stage. He has amazing powers that go far beyond mere "cutlery distortion" and telling people things about themselves that they already know.

- This is a psychic whose powers apparently have already been tested in scientific experiments that produced highly statistically significant results.

- This is a psychic who has already personally entertained many of the world's leaders, and impressed them with his powers.

Well, so far, this is not that different from what we have seen before perhaps, but now, suppose the following:

- This psychic has offered to use his powers to negotiate a lasting peace amongst warring factions in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Iraq and in Kashmir. He has told members of the United Nations Security Council, who gave him a private audience, that by being able to read the minds of the leaders of the pro-

tagonists in the various conflicts, he will bring about better communication and better understanding of issues. He might even resort to altering the mindsets of recalcitrant leaders by means of psychokinesis, turning them into peace-seekers and compromisers. The members of the

allowed to mess about in these seemingly intractable conflicts.

Let's not quibble about the likelihood of such a scenario, but let's focus instead on what qualities we would want our emissary to possess in such a case. I've made a list:

Ray Hyman has made truly outstanding contributions to the promotion of science and the defense of reason.

Security Council have become so convinced of his powers that they are about to name him Ambassador-At-Large and Chief Negotiator for World Peace.

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal is not amused by this news.

CSICOP and its supporters protest loudly, and finally we are informed by the Security Council that we may send an emissary—one person only—who will be allowed to evaluate the supporting research and to test the psychic directly, and then present his or her findings and conclusions directly to that world body.

Well, this is pretty important stuff—much more important than the usual CSICOP work. After all, if, as we suspect, this man is a phony, there is the likelihood of tremendous harm being done to the cause of world peace if he is

1. Since scientific evidence has been adduced to support claims of the psychic's powers, our emissary should be a scientist, preferably a social scientist, someone who knows how to conduct and evaluate research involving human subjects; someone who knows how to detect flaws and biases in such experiments.
2. We need an expert in statistics, since statistical analysis was part of the scientific support offered for the psychic's powers.
3. We need an expert in the psychology of belief and deception, someone who knows all about how people can both deceive and be deceived.
4. We need someone with sound academic credentials, for credibility is going to be a very important if our emissary is to have an influence on the Security Council.
5. We need someone with expert

knowledge of magic and mentalism, for if the psychic is using the magician/mentalists' craft, only someone experienced and knowledgeable in this craft will be able to detect this. As the saying goes, *it takes a thief to catch a thief.*

6. We need someone who is experienced in evaluating supposed psychics and the research adduced in their support. Without such experience, even a very good social scientist may overlook important sources of error and bias.
7. We need someone who has a track record for fairness, someone who has gained the respect of skeptics and believers alike, so that our emissary will not be seen as some sort of hit man for CSICOP and skepticism.
8. We need a good communicator. It is not enough just to be able to show that the psychic is not really psychic at all. We need someone who can cogently present the skeptical case in such a way as to have an impact on the members of the Security Council.
9. We need someone who does not antagonize others, someone whose personality and charm will ease the sting of whatever critical commentary he or she has to offer to the Security Council.

Well, that's quite a list, and one that is almost impossible to fill, one might think.

I know of only one person in the entire world—and believe me, I am not exaggerating here; I really mean it—who measures up to all these criteria. And he is in our midst tonight.

Let me tell you about Ray Hyman:

- Ray earned his Ph.D. at Harvard University, where he then taught statistics, amongst other subjects. He is now Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Oregon, where he taught for many years.

- He is an expert in cognitive psychology.

- He is an expert in statistical analysis.

- He is an expert in research design as applied to the study of human subjects.

- He is an expert in the study of deception and self-deception and has

dedicated most of his professional career to the study of why people come to believe strange things, how they can be fooled, and how some people set out to fool them.

- He has published books, book chapters, and over 200 articles that critically evaluate studies of the paranormal and related domains. His article on cold reading, so Paul Kurtz informs me, has



James Alcock (right) presents the "In Praise of Reason" award to Ray Hyman.

generated more requests for reprints than any other article in the history of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*.

- He is an expert in magic and mentalism. Few people outside of magic circles are aware of just how accomplished he is as a magician/mentalists. Indeed, he started out by earning his living as a mentalist. He is also an accomplished inventor of magical effects and routines. He is highly respected by other magicians, and has had the rare honor of twice appearing on the cover of the *Linking Ring*, the monthly magazine of the International Brotherhood of Magicians.

- He has a long and unparalleled history of investigating psychics. Some of this work has been for official agencies such as the United States Defense Department and the United States National Research Council. He knows personally all of the leading, and many of the not-so-leading, parapsychologists

in the world, and is respected by virtually all of them.

- He is, of course, a champion among skeptics, and one of the founders of CSICOP.

- He is known above all for being fair-minded—so much so that on more than one occasion I have been approached by people at CSICOP conferences who have complained that he had gone soft on parapsychology. They believed that he had "gone soft" because, rather than taking a debunking stance as they had wanted, he had approached the topic of paranormal claims from the point of view of scientific objectivity.

- In terms of personality, Ray is able to be highly critical of parapsychologists and psychics without antagonizing them. Indeed, no doubt every one of us who has talked with Ray knows of his warmth and charm, and knows as well that no matter how stupid or ill-informed our questions might be—and I've asked my share—he never makes us feel foolish for having asked.

He is always patient in his explanations and never condescending.

Ray Hyman clearly meets all the criteria in my list. I can think of no other individual in the entire world who could do the same.

The In Praise of Reason Award is CSICOP's highest honor, and is given to those rare individuals who have made truly outstanding contributions to the promotion of science and the defense of reason. Previous recipients include such stellar scientists and communicators as Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, Nobel laureate Murray Gell-Mann, and our own outstanding editor, Ken Frazier.

Tonight, I take great personal pride in being able to present, on behalf of CSICOP, the In Praise of Reason Award to my friend and colleague Ray Hyman, from whom I—and I am sure all of us—continue to learn so much.

Congratulations, Ray. □