

BOOK REVIEWS

THE GOLD LEAF LADY AND OTHER PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
by Stephen E. Braude. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press,
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Too often in recent years, books on parapsychology are, in the end, a disappointment. Either they are simply reviews of data that have been reviewed before and do not lend themselves very well into any sort of cohesive whole, or the authors draw conclusions and build theories on data altogether too sketchy to make such exercises meaningful. Stephen E. Braude's *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations* is a welcome exception, as it does not fall into either of these categories.

Braude opens, in the preface, with a discussion of the reception his interest in parapsychology has had in the halls of academia, which had often been considerably less than genial. This phenomenon itself, the dismissive rejection of the phenomena generally categorized as "paranormal," is certainly worth discussion. Braud's descriptions of the almost-hostile (or in some cases, overtly hostile) reception his interests receive from some of his academic colleagues will be familiar to many readers of this book and of the *Journal of Parapsychology* itself, and is itself of considerable interest. It is often said that this rejection occurs because accepting the reality of ESP would require an unwanted shift in overall worldview, but this cannot explain the intensity of the reactions. Such ideas as relativity and quantum dynamics also required shifts in worldview, and certainly these were controversial at the outset, but Einstein and the physicists who developed the theories of quantum mechanics did not have to deal with the complete dismissal of ideas and data, often by scientists who readily admit no familiarity at all with this data. As Braude notes, the reactions of these scientists—who should by their profession if nothing else be open to new ideas, and who certainly should respect rigorously collected data—is not infrequently, to use Braud's term, disgraceful. The use of logical fallacies such as focusing on the weakest cases, resorting to ad hominem attacks, and deliberately distorting the data or the conclusions drawn from it are sadly commonplace. It would be good for the field—and for science in general—if at some point this attitude could be thoroughly understood. It now appears to be mere peer pressure, a fear of being so ridiculed by one's colleagues that only a relative few, such as Braude himself, are not intimidated and continue to follow wherever the evidence leads.

The first chapter in the book deals with Katy, the "Gold Leaf Lady" of the book's title. Most "paranormal" phenomena can be placed in one of the well-known classes: ESP, PK, and so on. Katy is one of those cases

that defy easy categorization. The phenomenon that Braud is primarily studying with Katy has to do with the appearance of “gold foil” on her skin at apparently random times. The protocols of the observations made are presented in excellent detail, and an analysis of the foil itself is included, showing that it is not in fact gold at all but ordinary brass foil. Braud follows this information with a discussion of why these odd events might be happening, but, as is so often the case with these sorts of things, no real answers are forthcoming; we have learned what is happening, and we can speculate on why, but as to mechanisms—such as, where does the brass itself come from—we are left without a clue.

But perhaps of as much interest as the observations of Katy herself is Braude’s discussion of her planned appearance on the TV show *Unsolved Mysteries*, during which philosopher-skeptic Paul Kurtz became involved. In a section entitled “Sleazy Skepticism,” Braude accurately refers to Kurtz’s skepticism as a “religious crusade.” As is the case with so many of the self-styled “skeptics” today, his interest is very clearly not in understanding the facts but in finding ways to debunk—or at least appear to debunk—any “paranormal” explanation for the phenomena observed. To this end, Kurtz presents students with foil attached to their bodies with hair spray and insists that this must be the way Katy was doing it, thus ignoring the observations and the analyses, which essentially rules this sort of explanation out. This discussion—and others of the same sort that follow later in the book—is important since it is such a common feature of “skepticism” today: the premise that, if an ability can be simulated using the techniques of stage magic, anyone showing that ability must therefore be using stage magic. The logical fallacy here is hardly worth commenting upon and would be immediately pointed out by these same people if applied to almost any other situation, yet it persists.

The discussions of Katy, of a cooperative and apparently capable subject named Dennis Lee, a difficult subject named Joe Nuzum, and a law-enforcement officer Braude refers to simply as “K.R.,” all make for interesting and entertaining reading. K.R. is a common type, someone who is convinced he is able to do something unusual—in his case, the ability to “transfer images” from photographs to his body or to another surface such as, for example, a bedspread. As it turns out, K.R.—who we would hope that in his capacity as a law-enforcement officer would be observant—is a victim of pareidolia, the common human tendency to see meaningful images in random patterns. Most readers who have done any sort of field investigations in parapsychology will find this very familiar—as does the author of this review, who once sat and watched more than 300 virtually identical slides of a sheepskin draped over a chair, upon which the owner of the sheepskin swore he could see changing pictures of mystical significance.

The subject of one of the later chapters is the always-enigmatic Ted Serios, the Chicago elevator-operator who apparently could produce recognizable images on Polaroid film. The chapter contains a fairly extensive

review of the experiments Jule Eisenbud did with Serios and also describes some effects, less impressive but just as hard to explain, that Braude himself witnessed. Explanations for Serios's "thoughtography" are just as elusive (and always have been) as explanations for the Gold Leaf Lady herself, and Braude does not really offer any speculations. As is discussed in the chapter, Serios is often dismissed today by the commonly repeated statement that "magicians" have been able to replicate the effect by trickery—and to this is often added, "with even more success." The magician primarily discussed here is of course the ubiquitous James Randi, and, as Braude points out, the simple fact is that Randi was not ever able to produce the effect in the same way Serios did. There is in this chapter a fascinating discussion of the *Today* show episode where Randi attempted to produce the effect—after having made a wager with Eisenbud that he could—and failed. Braude notes that Randi never paid this bet off, which leaves one to wonder if his ongoing million dollar challenge would ever be paid off regardless of what phenomena were demonstrated—which is certainly the opinion of many in the field.

The second chapter, entitled "Historical Interlude," is of more serious interest, however. Here, Braude, suggesting that the phenomena surrounding the "Gold Leaf Lady" reflects the tradition of the physical mediums of the 19th century, such as D. D. Home and Eusapia Palladino. It is well known that the effects produced during the séances conducted by these and others were far more dramatic than anything seen today, and they are usually dismissed by skeptics on the grounds that "people were more gullible then, or more predisposed to see miraculous things," or that the extant technology was just not capable of uncovering the tricks these mediums were using to produce these effects; Braude calls these "arguments from human bias" and "arguments from technology." He then proceeds to show why neither of these can logically be used to dismiss the numerous eyewitness reports of these phenomena, and how they particularly cannot be used to dismiss experimentation as careful and meticulous as any done today, such as the experiments on D.D. Home conducted by the physicist Edward Crookes.

To the question of why such large-scale phenomena as the levitation of heavy tables, pianos, and such apparently accomplished by D.D. Home no longer seem to happen today, Braude notes that the overall outlook is now generally different. During the heyday of these mediums, it was generally believed that the "spirits," which the medium was merely a conduit for, were accomplishing the feats, not the medium himself or herself. The medium, as the term itself implies, merely facilitated their presence. Gradually, as the 19th century gave way to the 20th, that view began to change, and the idea of spirits began to fade in popularity and acceptance. Today, almost any parapsychologist would suggest that Home and the others were accomplishing these feats by psychokinesis—but they are obviously more profound by several orders of magnitude than any PK

effects commonly seen in laboratories today. The problem, Braude suggests, is that the medium must now take responsibility for these phenomena, must acknowledge that he or she is producing the effects personally, and that this in itself tends to inhibit the subject.

The implications of this speculation, if correct, are potentially profound. Modern subjects—Braude mentions Nina Kulagina and Felicia Parise—seem to expend enormous amounts of energy to produce very small physical effects. If the reports from the 19th century are correct, this was not the case with mediums like Home and Palladino. If subjects are retreating from producing profound effects the way Home did routinely—such as levitating heavy tables, often with several people seated on them—then it might well be possible to find a way around this in a laboratory setting. A protocol that could produce these effects in a modern laboratory setting would be an enormous leap forward for parapsychology in general. Braude's discussion of the past might well point the way toward such a breakthrough.

More enigmatic, and potentially much more disturbing in its implications, is Braude's chapter entitled "The Synchronicity Confusion." The idea of synchronicity has been around for quite a while and is commonly used to explain "coincidences" that intuitively seem far too unlikely to have happened by chance. One may understand intellectually that an infinite number of monkeys typing on an infinite number of typewriters (or, being more modern, computer keyboards) would eventually produce all the works of Shakespeare, but if one is presented with a full three-act play, properly formatted, and told that a monkey typed it, one could easily be excused for doubting this. Braude gives several examples, such as telling the story of a blind man in Mississippi driving a car under the direction of its too-drunk-to-drive owner to a waitress in a restaurant in Maine, only to discover that a virtually identical incident had occurred in the town where he'd chosen to vacation and was quite familiar to the waitress he'd chosen to tell the story to—and this taking place exactly when he focused on sorting out his thoughts about synchronicity.

Incidents like this are not hard to find, and Braude cites some other examples as well, including one from the man who coined the term synchronicity, Carl Gustav Jung. With impeccable logic, Braude shows that Jung's concept of synchronicity as a fundamental law of nature similar to the Pauli exclusion principle simply does not hold up under analysis, and Jung's explanations in terms of "archetypes" simply back the problem up a step. This is, as Braude explains, because the "event clusters" that make up synchronicities are only meaningful in terms of their context, that is, according to the way they are interpreted by the person who experiences them.

Braude follows this with the perfectly logical question—given that these "event clusters" cannot represent some basic law of nature—are they possibly being caused by human agents through ESP, PK, or both? He does

specifically state that “this kind of perspective and inventory-relativism doesn’t mean that there’s no reality independent of our mental activity,” but at times it does sound dangerously close to the concept held by some Native American cultures to the effect that reality as we know it is predicated on the consensus of whatever sentient beings are participating in it, and if the consensus changes, so does the reality. That is probably carrying the idea considerably beyond its logical conclusion, but these concepts, if verified, would require rather profound changes in the way we think about scientific experimentation, as this would open the door to “experimenter effect” at a far more intrusive level than has ever been considered before.

In the final pages of this very thought-provoking chapter, Braude considers the idea that the agent creates the event cluster through multiple and very complex applications of ESP and PK. He then basically rejects that concept in favor of what he calls a “magic wand”—a simple intent for a certain outcome that brings about this outcome through a variety of means, not all of which are ever known. Braude does not mention it, but this concept would be familiar to practitioners of various systems of what those individuals would refer to as “real magic” (now commonly spelled “magick” to distinguish it from stage magic and illusion). Whether there is any reality to “magick” not only remains to be demonstrated but has yet to attract much attention from serious parapsychologists. Braude’s ideas about synchronicity suggest that this might be an oversight. On the other hand, no particular evidence is offered for this viewpoint other than the fact that the alternatives seem too complex to be tenable.

The final chapter in the book, referred to as a “postscript,” deals with astrology, a subject mostly ignored and often denigrated by serious parapsychologists. Here, he does mention the interesting work done by French statistician Michel Gauquelin which apparently shows that champion athletes are likely to have Mars in certain positions in their horoscopes and the effort by Paul Kurtz and other members of CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) to refute this research, in the process of which they ended up confirming it—and then, through outright falsification of data, tried to conceal the confirmation, an episode which speaks volumes about modern skeptics and their motivations.

But the vast majority of the chapter concerns astrology as practiced by Braude’s wife, Gina, who, he says, has been an astrological consultant to the Serbian mafia and for several major soccer teams worldwide. He recites a number of incidents and describes the general methods used by professional astrologers. In one section, he rather strongly states that, in his opinion, the methods his wife is using to make her forecasts are mathematical, not intuitive, that is, she is not doing this by any kind of ESP but rather strictly “by the numbers.”

However, nowhere does he offer any sort of detail. Numbers and analyses such as those concerning the Gold Leaf Lady are entirely lacking in this chapter. Braude states that he obviously cannot go into detail about

his wife's dealings with the Serbian mafia ("I value my knees," he says), and he is not specific about which teams she consults for or about any particular games. He does mention that they used Gina's predictions to make bets in Las Vegas on American NFL football games and notes that they "did very well," but he admits that he did not keep any detailed records. Reading this, I was reminded of an acquaintance of mine who frequently plays dice in Las Vegas and insists that he "has a system" and thus "always wins." However, talking to friends of his who commonly accompany him on these excursions reveals that his "system" is that he forgets about losing episodes and remembers only the wins.

This is not necessarily the case with Braude's NFL bets, but we have no way of knowing. The particular mathematics Gina uses in her predictions are apparently hers alone, and she wants to keep them proprietary, so they are not only not detailed but not even described. Taken as a whole, this chapter, while an entertaining read, is really only a series of anecdotes. As it concerns the activities of Braude's wife, one cannot even reasonably expect objectivity, and as such it seems entirely out of place within the context of the book as a whole, which probably would have been better if this chapter had not been included.

Overall, however, this is an excellent book, well deserving of a prominent place on the parapsychologist's bookshelf. Just skip most of the final chapter, starting again at part 7, entitled "Summing up Parapsychology," which nicely sums up the remainder of the book in two and a half pages.

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