

PARANORMALITY: WHY WE SEE WHAT ISN'T THERE by Richard Wiseman.
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Richard Wiseman is well known (at least in the UK) as a psychologist, magician, and nowadays Professor of the Public Understanding of Psychology. Wiseman's latest book, *Paranormality*, happens to differ from all my other books in two ways: first because on its spine is printed the word "Professor," and second because on its back cover is a quote by the biologist Richard Dawkins, a former Professor of the Public Understanding of Science. The book's subtitle, *Why We See What Isn't There*, clearly indicates Wiseman's stance and the equally skeptical Dawkins thinks that the book "... blows away the psychic fog and lets in the clear light of reason."

Paranormality is a highly selective popular scientific treatment of psychological and parapsychological research as seen from a skeptic's perspective. According to Wiseman (2011b) this was not what the major American publishers wanted (although one wonders whether Prometheus Books in New York was contacted since they would likely love to publish it). Wiseman thus decided to produce it as an e-book and let his British publisher ship hard copies to America. Furthermore, he has actively promoted the book with popular articles that derive from the book (e.g., Wiseman, 2011a, 2012), and I daresay it sells well, because Wiseman is a good writer. His latest and several of his previous books also reveal that he

possesses a sense of humour. Getting the facts straight is, however, more important than writing style, and those well read in the parapsychology literature are unfortunately bound to get more than a bit annoyed more than once.

Initially Wiseman tells us that he became interested in magic when just 8 years old and that he, like most magicians, was deeply skeptical about the existence of genuine paranormal phenomena. The latter is an oft-repeated claim by skeptics, and what they (including Wiseman) fail to mention is that the results of surveys with magicians around 1980 did in fact reveal that the majority of them believed ESP exists. Although the results of more recent surveys, including Wiseman's (2008) own (still unpublished?), indicate that magicians as a group have become more skeptical with time (see Truzzi, 1997). However, about 1 in 4 of the magicians that participated in Wiseman's survey thought that they had had a paranormal experience, and several of them while trying to fool others with their tricks! Magicians have also now and then been involved in parapsychological research, and some have endorsed paranormal phenomena (e.g., see Hansen, 1990). Wiseman does not mention any of this.

In his first chapter, Wiseman gives a short account of his, Smith's, and Milton's (1998) experiment with the dog Jaytee, who according to witnesses reliably signaled his owner's homecoming by going to and staying at the window. Wiseman manages to discuss the experiment, which consisted of a total of four trials, without mentioning Rupert Sheldrake's extensive research with "dogs that know when their owners are coming home" (Sheldrake's book is, however, mentioned in the chapter's notes). Furthermore, despite Wiseman's having acknowledged that "... the patterning in my studies is the same as the patterning in Rupert's studies. That's not up for grabs. That's fine. It's how it's interpreted" (Tsakiris, 2007), the reader is left with the impression that "psychic pets" have been debunked—a proper explanation of the heated controversy would have been more appropriate. Furthermore, it is hardly appropriate to draw conclusions based on the results of just four trials.

In the following chapter, Wiseman describes the skeptics' figurehead, the magician James Randi, as "the most notable investigator" (p. 16) of mediums and psychics, and not a word is dedicated to the more scientific research with mediums by, for example, Gary Schwartz and Julie Beischel. Instead, Hendrik Boerenkamp's (1988) research from the 1980s and Sybo Schouten's (1994) review of quantitatively evaluated studies with mediums and psychics are mentioned in passing, perhaps because their conclusions are more in line with so-called skeptics' beliefs. The reader also gets an account of the medium Patricia Prutt's attempt to win Randi's million dollar prize, and various techniques that mediums and psychics are assumed or believed to utilize are described. If they are indeed used to the extent that skeptics believe, the techniques do not appear to work particularly well since the results of a survey in the UK (Roe, 1998), which

Wiseman cites, revealed that only around 1 of 6 people believed that they had received an accurate reading from a psychic.

Needless to say, Wiseman's claim that "For a century researchers have tested the claims of mediums and psychics and found them wanting" (p. 22) comes across as embarrassingly erroneous for those familiar with the relevant literature. Interested readers are recommended to consult Rodger Andersson's (2006) *Psychics, Sensitives and Somnambules* for references.

In the third chapter, Wiseman relates how researchers have attempted to weigh and photograph the soul. This is followed by an account of the well-known "tennis shoe case," which concerns a woman, Maria, who claimed that during a near-death experience she saw a tennis shoe on a roof, and the shoe was indeed there. The case was later investigated by three skeptics (Hayden, Mulligan, & Beyerstein, 1996), who attempted to show that Maria learned about the shoe in other ways, and without hesitation Wiseman accepts their version. He then leaves near-death experiences and turns to out-of-body experiences, which the reader learns are due to our being fooled by our brains.

In passing, Wiseman also concludes, based on the results of only one study (i.e., Blackmore & Chamberlain, 1993), that the evidence indicates twin telepathy is not due to ESP; I daresay that Guy Lyon Playfair (2002/2012), who has reviewed all the research, would beg to differ. Wiseman also relates that oft-repeated fairy tale about Blackmore's inability to get positive results during, in his version, 25 years of research (but see Berger, 1989).

Later the spotlight is moved to James Allan Hydrick and his inability to turn the pages of a telephone book psychokinetically when it was surrounded by styrofoam chips. As one now expects, Wiseman describes several techniques used by magicians and fake psychics, and gives an interesting account of how S. John Davey in 1890 pretended to be a medium in order to assess the reliability of eyewitness accounts of séances. The focus is then moved to spiritualism and the Fox sisters, who gave rise to many urban legends that are often uncritically accepted. Wiseman's account is not worse than others. He quotes from Margaret Fox's questionable confession and seems to accept it as genuine. The ages mentioned in the confession do not, however, match what the sisters' mother said at the time of the incidents (see Lewis, 1848/2005). Regardless, Wiseman moves on to table tipping and Michael Faraday's well-known experiments, then to ideomotor actions and Ouija boards. Likely less known to parapsychologists is the research by Dan Wegner on the "rebound effect" (e.g., Wegner & Schneider, 2003), "... wherein trying not to think about something causes people to dwell on the forbidden topic" (p. 162) and trying to stop pendulums from moving actually increases their swinging.

Wiseman also dedicates some pages to Gef the talking mongoose and the controversial Harry Price, before moving on to ghosts and his and his colleagues' investigation of the purportedly haunted Hampton Court

Palace (Wiseman et al., 2002, 2003). Sleep-paralysis is also described, and Wiseman notes the similarity between accounts of experiences while in the hypnagogic state and some of the phenomena that are interpreted as being due to ghosts, for example, hearing footsteps. Given this and how unpleasant sleep-paralysis can be, every parapsychologist should be familiar with the phenomenon.

Wiseman does not deal with poltergeists (I imagine that would not end well); instead he reviews the evidence of ghost experiences' association with electromagnetic fields and infrasound. He also briefly describes the controversy over Pehr Granqvist and his colleagues' failed attempt to replicate Michael Persinger and his colleagues' experiments (Granqvist et al. 2004). The former found that the level of "spiritual experiences" in both experimental and control groups matched the level that Persinger saw in his control groups (Khamsi, 2004), and based on their findings, claimed that suggestion caused the experiences, whereas the latter believe that two sham fields were in fact administered due to technical problems (Persinger & Koren, 2004; Larsson et al. 2005). It is interesting to note that if Granqvist and his colleagues' results were not due to technical problems, then their results suggest that both self-styled skeptics Susan Blackmore and Michael Shermer are prone to have spiritual experiences due to suggestion alone, given their experiences in Persinger's lab.

Eventually Wiseman highlights how entertainers fake mind-reading and deals with the power of persuasion, and lucid dreams in passing. Clever Hans, Wilhelm von Osten's amazing horse, also makes an appearance. A sentence from this section can serve to illustrate Wiseman's sense of humour; he writes that "Both von Osten and Clever Hans were prone to rage, and Pfungst received several bites during the investigation, the majority of which came from the horse" (p. 245). Wiseman claims that the use of blind methods in science is due to the experiments with the horse in the early 1900s, which is not true (see Kaptchuk, 1998). Wolfgang Bringmann and Johannes Abresch (1997) also note that although

Pfungst was admittedly the only person who ever observed the microsignal interactions between Hans and von Osten, his findings and explanations ... were fully accepted by the public and experts. Even today the story of Clever Hans is regarded as a classic example of outstanding psychological research. (p. 79)

Wiseman also deals with purportedly precognitive dreams, which he quickly dismisses as being due to coincidences. One of his popular articles on this (Wiseman, 2011a) provoked a response from Robert McLuhan (2011), the author of *Randi's Prize*. Wiseman uses John Barker's (1967) study of premonitions of the Aberfan disaster as an example, and as David Luke (2011, pp. 188–189; see also Holt et al. 2012, pp. 21–26) has

noted, Wiseman's suggested calculations (pp. 287–288) are more than a bit questionable.

It is noteworthy, although at this point not surprising, that no mention is made of the Maimonides Dream ESP Studies, nor are the ganzfeld and the remote viewing research ever mentioned, and one may wonder if this is because Wiseman has, according to the skeptic Kylie Sturgess (2009), admitted that the evidence from these two latter lines of research "... do meet the usual standards for a normal claim, but are not convincing enough for an extraordinary claim," and may thus have been regarded as unsuitable topics for this particular book. What is convincing enough for an extraordinary claim then? Richard Dawkins (2005) has written:

All of us would set the bar very high for, say, a claimed demonstration that two men, sealed in separate soundproof rooms, can reliably transmit information to each other telepathically. We should demand multiple replications under ultrarigorous, double-blind controlled conditions, with a battery of professional illusionists as skeptical scrutineers and with a statistical p value less than one in a billion. (p. 977)

In summary, regarded as a popular scientific treatment of parapsychology, the book comes across as the result of either selective reading of the relevant literature or as a result of selective memory. That said, nobody expects full coverage of this literature in a book of the length Wiseman has written (and the text is not single-spaced), but the many omissions of research not in line with the skeptics' favorite hypotheses are hard to defend. The reference list on its own will reveal several omissions for those well read in the parapsychology literature; in particular, one wonders why so few parapsychological experiments are cited. In passing, it can also be noted that the book has no index, which would have been useful due to the fact that most topics are covered on only a few pages. Regarded as entertainment or as material for a case study of how skeptics treat and neglect research, it is, however, excellent. As a guide for individuals willing to act as fraudulent psychics, it is also of use. Wiseman is not a bad writer, highlights the same issues as most skeptics, and does bring out some interesting psychological studies. Furthermore, the book is filled with all manner of exercises (e.g., "How to leave your body"), links to additional material (e.g., interviews), and an instant superhero kit for those who feel that they need to try to impress their friends.

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