

Essays from the Edge

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A Review of *Dangerous Pursuits: Mediumship, Mind, and Music*, by Stephen E. Braude.
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Here is another outstanding collection of Braude's shorter works, reminiscent of his *Crimes of Reason*. These are from the period 1993 – 2014, and as in the earlier book, often substantially expanded and revised. It is available from Amazon as a paperback or Kindle format.

Braude's prefaces are as good as any of the essays they precede – they let you know what the book is about and why the individual pieces were selected. I cannot refrain from offering a sample from the preface to this book: "The title of this collection, *Dangerous Pursuits*, is a wry allusion to my obstacle-strewn career path over the past several decades – to the vindictive hostility, ridicule, and condescension I've encountered (both inside and outside the academy) for my decision to look carefully at the data and theoretical issues of parapsychology" (pp. 46-7). The author's wit, honesty, and tenacity shine throughout his writings.

Dr. Braude can always be counted on for either some new and surprising topic or an original view of something familiar. This book is no exception. It looks at several mediums, one personally investigated by the author, and a couple of historical figures, D. D. Home and Carlos Mirabeli. There are some careful discussions clarifying several parapsychological themes and terminology; two pieces, the first and final essays, are in my opinion really "on the edge" – exploring areas about which we seldom think.

I found the first essay, "The Fear of Psi," especially striking. This connects the reduction of effect size of parapsychological phenomena over the last two centuries with methodological problems in present day psi studies. I consider this point so important, that I here offer some fragments from the essay:

...we no longer see such things as Home's accordion and other phenomena. But if we can't explain that fact by appealing to the advent of modern technology (or to a greater degree of gullibility around the turn of the century), what sense can we make of it? I want to suggest that the fear of psi has probably played a major role....great mediums of that era were all sincere spiritists. That is, they believed that they were merely facilitating phenomena produced by discarnate spirits; they didn't believe they actually produced the phenomena themselves. But that means that those individuals were off the hook psychologically no matter what happened. For example, if nothing (or only boring phenomena) occurred, the medium could

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always attribute the failures to an inept communicator or to a “bad connection” between this world and the spirit world. But more important, when impressive phenomena did occur, mediums didn’t have to fear the extent of their own powers. They didn’t have to worry about what psychokinetic havoc they might wreak (consciously or unconsciously) outside the safe confines of the séance room....As time went on....more people, both in and out of the field of psychical research, took seriously the possibility that physical mediums might in fact be PK agents and therefore the actual cause of phenomena attributed by others to surviving spirits.... Mediums knew that even some sympathetic investigators considered them to be causes of — and not simply vessels for — paranormal physical phenomena. So they now had a concern that quite possibly had never entered their minds before — namely, that they might have powers they couldn’t control...Eusapia Palladino’s impressive phenomena in the 1890s and first decade of the twentieth century were less impressive than those of Home twenty years earlier. And it’s even less surprising to find that many of the mediumistic “superstars” in the next several decades of the twentieth century had increasingly less intimidating repertoires of phenomena (pp. 335-357).

The essay explores the “fear effect,” not only in the mediums, but in parapsychologists and other academics as well.

“Reflections on Super Psi,” the sixth essay, is perhaps the most complete and thoughtful discussion of “super psi” that I have encountered. Braude makes clear the complexity of the issues that have provoked this explanation and also how difficult it is even to define the notion. I confess that I have some problems with the eighth essay: “Can the Deceased Have a Perceptual Point of View?” Although much discussion and reasoning are presented, I was disappointed that Braude did not deal with the reports of near death and out of body experiences. Many of these clearly describe firmly located points of view, whether in the hospital or more exotic environments. If we do not insist that consciousness, and hence points of view, are confined to the brain, then mental habit if nothing else would seem to at least *prefer* a localized perspective for observation.

In “Multiple Personality and the Structure of the Self,” Braude offers a short discussion of topics dealt with in much greater detail in his fundamental work *First Person Plural*. He argues that the multiple personalities in cases of dissociative identity disorder (DID) are creative adaptations devised by the self to deal with trauma and not pre-existing “parts” of the self. When this phenomenon was first observed in the early days of hypnosis, it was thought that these “other selves” were pre-existing and not caused or invited by the hypnotists themselves.

Although Braude does not mention it, the work of Hal and Sidra Stone, known as *Voice Dialog*, would seem to demonstrate that similar but non-pathological sub-personalities can be identified as creative mechanisms for dealing with the minor traumas involved in the socialization process we all have undergone.

As an admirer of Carl Jung, I was disappointed not to see some reference to his work and thinking on the complexes as sub-personalities. To illustrate the relevance of this criticism, I insert a quote from

Jung's article, "A Review of the Complex Theory":

So far, I have purposely avoided discussing the nature of complexes, on the tacit assumption that their nature is generally known. The word "complex" in its psychological sense has passed into common speech both in German and in English.

Everyone knows nowadays that people "have complexes." What is not so well known, though far more important theoretically, is that complexes can have us. The existence of complexes throws serious doubt on the naïve assumption of the unity of consciousness, which is equated with "psyche," and on the supremacy of the will. Every constellation of a complex postulates a disturbed state of consciousness. The unity of consciousness is disrupted and the intentions of the will are impeded or made impossible. Even memory is often noticeably affected, as we have seen. The complex must therefore be a psychic factor which, in terms of energy, possesses a value that sometimes exceeds that of our conscious intentions, otherwise such disruptions of the conscious order would not be possible at all. And in fact, an active complex puts us momentarily under a state of duress, of compulsive thinking and acting, for which under certain conditions the only appropriate term would be the judicial concept of diminished responsibility. (para. 200)

The last essay, "The Language of Jazz Improvisation," while it has a small psi discussion toward the end, is, in my opinion, really important in broadening what we mean by "language" – in this case, music. It's not verbal; it doesn't "say" anything expressible in words, but it definitely communicates. Exactly what and how seem to me to be open questions.

The only other place I know of that explores this notion is an old science fiction story from the mid-1960s, "Something Else" deservedly much anthologized. Along these same lines, in the early 1970s a Lama Foundation publication, *Seed*, offered 240 cards with images on both sides to prompt the exploration of some sort of "image language." As far as I know, nothing much ever came of this, but it was an interesting experiment for those of us who played with it.

It is good to see this expansion of Braude's works made easily available to the public.

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