

EDITORIAL

For SSE members fascinated by well-documented accounts of strong macro-PK phenomena, these are very exciting times. Three outstanding volumes have appeared in fairly short order, each of which is a major addition to the literature. The first to appear was Zofia Weaver’s book on the Polish medium Franek Kluski (Weaver 2015), reviewed in *JSE* 29:3. Shortly thereafter, Erlendur Haraldsson and Loftur Gissurarson published their detailed opus on the Icelandic medium Indridi Indridason (Haraldsson & Gissurarson 2015), reviewed in *JSE* 29:4. And then most recently, we’ve seen Michael Grosso’s long-awaited examination of the seventeenth-century flying friar, St. Joseph of Copertino, carrying the additional imprimatur of a respected academic press (Grosso 2016). It will be reviewed in the next issue (*JSE* 30:2).

These three books present many readers—including those already sympathetic to the existence of dramatic macro-PK phenomena—with a dilemma, well-expressed in an email I received recently from Alan Gauld. Gauld noted that

the phenomena described, or not a few of them, are so bizarre that it is next to impossible to believe in them, whilst the witnesses are often of such standing, and the precautions they take so sensible, that it is next to impossible not to believe them!

This is clearly reminiscent of Darwin’s comment about William Crookes’s experiments with the medium D. D. Home:

I cannot disbelieve Mr. Crookes’s statements, nor can I believe his results.

Many of the most respected researchers in the study of physical mediumship have expressed a similar conflict, and occasional (if not frequent) attacks of what we can call residual incredulity. I believe I understand this; I know it intimately from my own case. For example, no matter how carefully I studied the evidence in connection with the “Gold Leaf Lady” in Florida, and no matter how carefully I studied her myself, it took me several visits to Florida and almost continual reassessment of the full body of evidence before I was ready to state confidently that there was no satisfactory normal explanation of how a golden-colored foil could appear spontaneously and instantaneously on Katie’s body (Braude 2007). And even before that, when I wrote my defense of macro-PK phenomena in

The Limits of Influence (Braude 1997), I often had to read through both the firsthand accounts and my arguments over and over to reassure myself that I hadn't committed some error, either egregious or subtle.

In any case, this epistemological dilemma is one of the reasons it's so lame to charge, as many skeptics have done, that researchers into these large-scale phenomena are merely caught up in their own biases or predispositions to observe the phenomena, or to report the miraculous (see Braude 1997 for an extended discussion of this topic, and Braude 2007 for a more compact presentation). On the contrary, the most evidential reports are precisely from well-qualified researchers who had to struggle with their own biases *against* the phenomena generally, or their subjects in particular. The case of Eusapia Palladino is a particularly good resource in this regard. For example, Charles Richet said of his own belief in the physical phenomena of Palladino,

It took me twenty years of patient researches to arrive at my present conviction. Nay,—to make one last confession,—I am not yet even absolutely and irremediably convinced! In spite of the astounding phenomena I have witnessed during my sixty experiments with Eusapia, I have still a trace of doubt; doubt which is weak, indeed to-day, but which may perchance be stronger to-morrow. Yet such doubts, if they come, will not be due so much to any defect in the actual experiment, as to the inexorable strength of prepossession which holds me back from adopting a conclusion which contravenes the habitual and almost unanimous opinion of mankind. (Richet 1899:157)

Even more dramatically, the ideally qualified “Fraud Squad” of Feilding, Baggally, and Carrington that investigated Eusapia in Naples in 1908, went to Italy *expecting* to establish that Eusapia was a fraud. Their revealing and honest comments, recorded after each of the eleven séances, reveals quite clearly how they struggled with their own biases against both Eusapia in particular and macro-PK generally, and grudgingly concluded that out of approximately 500 documented phenomena, they could not detect any fraud and were compelled to conclude that Eusapia's phenomena were genuine. (See Feilding 1963, Feilding, Baggally, & Carrington 1909, or at least the summary in Braude 1997.)

Interestingly, the familiar skeptical dismissals of these exotic phenomena are often made with much more confidence (typically supplemented with a healthy dose of disdain) than the evidence—and certainly the skeptic's knowledge of that evidence—would support. But as philosopher C. J. Ducasse correctly observed,

. . . allegations of detection of fraud, or of malobservation, or of misinterpretation of what was observed, or of hypnotically induced hallucinations, have to be scrutinized *as closely and as critically* as must the testimony for the reality of the phenomena. For there is likely to be just as much wishful thinking, prejudice, emotion, snap judgment, naiveté, and intellectual dishonesty on the side of orthodoxy, of skepticism, and of conservatism, as on the side of hunger for and of belief in the marvelous. The emotional motivation for irresponsible disbelief is, in fact, probably even stronger—especially in scientifically educated persons whose pride of knowledge is at stake—than is in other persons the motivation for irresponsible belief. (Ducasse 1958:22)

This is not simply a point that's persuasive only in the abstract. On the contrary, the history of parapsychology chronicles an astounding degree of blindness, intellectual cowardice, and mendacity on the part of skeptics and ardent nonbelievers, some of them prominent scientists. For some juicy examples, see Braude (1997:27–31).

But the important point for now is that the skeptic and former skeptic typically share the same initial incredulity and conflict mentioned by Gauld and Darwin. The more dramatic physical phenomena from mediumship and poltergeist cases, even if they don't simply scare the hell out of us, at least initially rub us the wrong way epistemologically. No doubt some will claim that we have enough well-grounded scientific knowledge to conclude that the phenomena are impossible. But matters are not that simple. For one thing, that position often betrays a confusion between (a) claiming that a phenomenon is incompatible with current theory and (b) claiming that the phenomenon falls outside the domain of current theory (for more on that topic see Braude 1997: Chapter 1). That confusion is most prevalent among reductionists who think that the only genuine facts are those that can be accommodated within physical theory. But setting that issue aside, it's more prudent to try to retain a healthy respect for evidence, which can often frustrate our expectations and even wreak havoc with scientific reputations. In fact, I recommend that we heed the following words of William Crookes, written in connection with his study of D. D. Home.

Faraday says, "Before we proceed to consider any question involving physical principles, we should set out with clear ideas of the naturally possible and impossible." But this appears like reasoning in a circle: We are to investigate nothing till we know it to be possible, whilst we cannot say what is impossible, outside pure mathematics, till we know everything.

In the present case I prefer to enter upon the enquiry with no preconceived notions whatever as to what can or cannot be . . . believing, as I do, that we have by no means exhausted all human knowledge or fathomed

the depths of all the physical forces. (Crookes 1874:4, Medhurst, Goldney, & Barrington 1972:16)

So I suggest that, when confronted by our initial or instinctive incredulity (if not revulsion) in the face of dramatic instances of macro-PK, we try to keep in mind that science is fundamentally descriptive and not prescriptive, that no empirical claim is immune from revision, and that even well-entrenched scientific theories have an annoying tendency to be overthrown eventually.

One more matter, also concerning physical mediumship. This Issue includes, for the second time, two papers by Michael Nahm and myself about the physical medium Kai Mügge. Both papers describe recent developments in the investigation of Kai's mediumship. But this time, our reports will likely close the book on that subject, at least as far as the *JSE* is concerned. When Nahm and I published our earlier reports (Braude 2014, Nahm 2014), we noted that there was compelling evidence that Kai had used a magic trick on some occasions (not supervised by me), and that there was additional suggestive evidence of fraud on other occasions. Readers following this saga will see that Nahm and I have not changed our overall (and somewhat conflicting) assessments of Kai's mediumship. Whereas Nahm believes that most of Kai's phenomena (including his trance and his ectoplasm) are probably fraudulent, I continue to maintain that although Kai has certainly earned the suspicion now lavished on him, some of his phenomena (especially table levitations) are probably genuine, and that others (including object movements at a distance while the medium is under four-limb control) also are difficult to dismiss. But all this may never be settled satisfactorily. For reasons I discuss, it seems unlikely that Kai will again submit himself to examination by me or any other careful researcher. It appears, instead, that he would prefer to continue shooting himself in the foot.

—STEPHEN E. BRAUDE

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