

BOOK REVIEW

The Source and Significance of Coincidences: A Hard Look at the Astonishing Evidence by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette. Self-published, 2019. 632 pp. \$42.41 (paperback). ISBN 978-1733995702.

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Sharon Rawlette's offering to those appreciative (even enamored) of the fickle, unpredictable, and mystifying world of coincidences, is a mammoth tome of 600+ pages ambitiously bearing the title *The Source and Significance of Coincidences*. As the title suggests, Rawlette seeks to explain who or what might cause coincidences (these explanations are far-ranging), and she endeavors to point out what they mean (usually they have only a positive spin). Right from the outset, Rawlette gives the term coincidence its own special definition, but anyone steeped in the Jungian tradition cannot help but see that Rawlette's brand of coincidence runs parallel with Jung's (1952/1969) *meaningful coincidence*, better known as synchronicity. The many examples she gives fit the bill, and they don't require an overly flexible turn of mind to see it, but Rawlette insists on distinguishing her type of coincidences from paranormal experiences ("telepathic messages"), after-death (discarnate) communications, and even Jung's synchronicity. It is unfortunate that her definitions do not shore up the distinction she wishes to make: Coincidences are "physical events that appear to reflect the contents of people's minds," and they convey "personal meaning" (p. 11)—but that's synchronicity! Rawlette also includes as coincidences those events "without any obviously profound meaning and yet seem too improbable to be the mere products of chance" (p. 11). That could still be synchronicity—one couldn't spot a coincidence if it didn't have

some meaning (Flew, 1953), which may not dawn on someone as being profound until some time has passed.

It's not clear which of the two issues, meaning or chance, Rawlette sees as pivotal, or is more important to her, or is the bigger problem. We could assume they jostle with each other for pride of place in the interpretation stakes—sometimes chance supersedes; sometimes it's meaning; sometimes it's a tie. Not necessarily a fault of *Coincidences*, and Rawlette does an honorable job of reconciling the two, but I see her book as tacitly showing us how both concepts or constructs are impossible to nail down, so that very little is sorted out despite her in-depth considerations, analyses, and interpretations (this conclusion will become more apparent later).

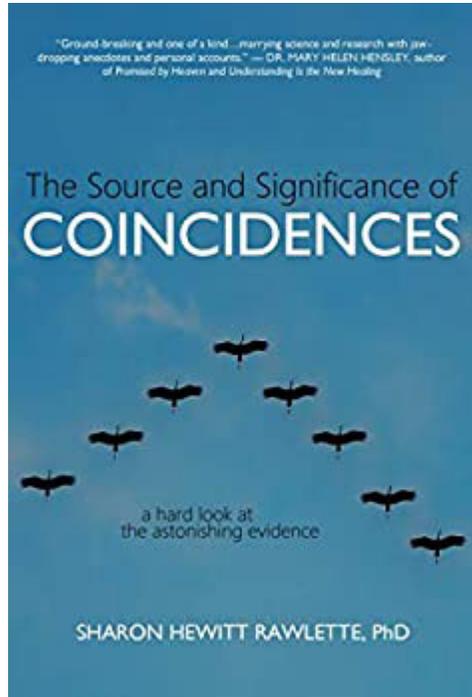
But Rawlette makes bigger claims for coincidences: Not only can entities existing in metaphysical or transcendental space causally account for the various coincidences, but the human mind is able to provide its own internal, independent, causal mechanism (generally called psi) in the form of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis (whole chapters are devoted to these topics). I don't make a distinction—for me, psi is one kind of coincidence (synchronicity actually; see Storm, 2008), whereas Rawlette is saying the situation that emerges from psi is the coincidence. I acknowledge there's a semantic 'fine line' here that blurs the boundaries, and has thus contributed to making anomalies of psi, coincidence, and synchronicity; the trouble being that for millennia, we have struggled with all three—dismissed them, depended on them, and even proved them, experientially and experimentally. What is lacking, however, is a consensus (perhaps one that is theory-driven), and *Coincidences* may be seen as one means by which Rawlette takes on the unenviable task of trying to help society and its various communities reach that consensus. Indeed, *Coincidences* may have some influence in that respect given its scope and scale—the book could work as an introductory primer that relentlessly covers every possible aspect of its topic in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of coincidence phenomena, and therefore its importance.

It remains to be seen whether Rawlette's aims of specifying source (Part One of her book) and significance (Part Two) go against her or not, but there's a worldview driving those aims, and it's not a new one (ironically, the term New Age suggests itself, but I don't say the book

fits that category entirely). I just mentioned how a consensus—a common understanding—is needed in our modern/postmodern but fragmented world. While I won't go into the sociological, psychological, scientific, and even scientific reasons for our failure to reach a consensus on the various anomalies, these reasons come to mind when, as already hinted at, Rawlette brings in God, angels, guides, and so on, as one set of causes (sources) of coincidences (the other cause being psi, as I also mentioned earlier). We know

how much the proposition of such entities grates with the skeptical communities, and although one does not always sympathize with their aims, let alone tolerate their practices and opinions, the issues they have are not unfounded, and need addressing.

To cut to the chase, it is not helpful to explain one mystery in terms of a number of other mysteries, and while skeptics are good at spotting the many worldviews driven by that 'logic', and believers not so much, many of both persuasions ought to be a little more open to the pursuit of a solid scientific foundation to their beliefs or disbeliefs. Otherwise, they're just nestling in dogma. To come closer to knowing than just believing (or disbelieving), one has to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions by asking the right questions. In that sense, the text is not without its problems—for example, it is implied that ghosts ("the dead") can appear to whomsoever they like (they are selective; see p. 175). But by what power does an entity have the capacity to be selective? How does it screen itself off from others? What special physics or metaphysics explains it? Why should being psychic have anything



to do with it? What does psychic even mean? So much is assumed in *Coincidences*, and it may be nigh impossible to answer these questions, but that's no excuse not to try, or ask.

To continue with one other aspect of the psyche/mind issue, we then encounter another fly in the ointment: mental illness. It can cause coincidences, but Rawlette reminds us that only a sound mind with normal reality-testing skills has a fighting chance at interpreting coincidences constructively. As historian Richard Tarnas (2007) noted:

The recognition of synchronicities requires subtle judgments made in circumstances usually pervaded by ambiguity and open to multiple interpretations. . . . Synchronicities seem to constitute a lived reality the experience of which depends deeply on the sensitive perception of context and nuance. For synchronicities have a shadow side as in the exaggeration of the trivial to discover a self-inflating meaning. (Tarnas, 2007, p. 55)

It is quite true that egotism, dissociation, delusion, and other mental aberrations distort reality, but it seems to me that there are no solid reasons why mental illness (even severe forms) could not play a legitimate role in coincidence formation that serves the afflicted person's ultimate good, and can be interpreted as such. It seems the examples Rawlette gives make it very clear that these kinds of 'imbalances' never have benefit (see pp. 249–250, 302). Of course, inflated egos and sick minds might see coincidences where none *seem* to exist, but who's to say—we haven't sufficiently plumbed the depths of coincidence phenomenology to know for sure where and when we may meet with elaborate tricksterish nonsense. Likewise, the balancing concept of yin/yang, that we've adopted from the East (for good reason), teaches us that there's going to be some devilry in *every* coincidence; so I don't mean we should only be watchful of obvious possession cases involving 'ill-meaning entities.'

And then there is Rawlette's treatment of the chance factor, which actually comes in very early in the book—the first chapter in fact. While Rawlette devotes a good two dozen pages to the topic of 'chance', that is not as substantial as the space spent on other topics (metaphysical

entities being a major player). It seems to me, chance is *the* pivotal issue that underpins the whole coincidence dichotomy (a bigger issue than meaning), and it is thereby the main tool of the Trickster,¹ getting us into all sorts of scrapes. And even though Rawlette acknowledges the presence of chance forces behind many coincidences, there is the assumption that coincidences come from a special place only if chance is ruled out of the picture. For Rawlette, chance acts like an ‘entity’ of sorts that does not allow one to comfortably embrace coincidences as not only *meaningful*, but also as ontologically *real* and *genuine*. But is it not possible that even a chance occurrence holds a meaning that can be of use to us? Tarnas’s advice would still hold—just substitute the word ‘synchronicities’ with the term ‘chance events’ in the quote above. *Coincidences* (the book) seems to make an enemy of chance, when the casual (everyday) usage of the term is in itself a stifling impediment to our understanding. Indeed, as Jung (1952/1969) has said

Chance, we say, must obviously be susceptible of some causal explanation and is only called “chance” or “coincidence” because its causality has not yet been discovered. (Jung, 1952/1969, paragraph 823)

Physicist and Jungian scholar Victor Mansfield (1995) agreed: “Implicit in the usual use of the word *chance* is a deep commitment to causality” (p. 80). They seem to be saying an event that happens by chance is not random, since anything that is *caused* automatically cannot be random! Perhaps we need to be very careful how we use these words.

Very wisely, Rawlette covers the problem of chance by discussing the Law of Very Large Numbers (a.k.a. Law of Truly Large Numbers) which tries to deal with chance in its own limited way. She explains its importance, but she is also in agreement with Bernard Beitman, who notes that the law “can only be properly applied when we have data for those large numbers” (Beitman, 2020, p. 47). However, and to go further, I see the Law as seriously getting in the way of understanding Rawlette-type coincidences, and more specifically, synchronicity. I say this because I regard the Law as overly explanatory, to the degree that every kind of age-old or newly discovered phenomenon can be caught

in its net, even scientific findings. Most scientists (partly speaking on behalf of their inner statistician) will tell you that there are checks and balances that help censor inappropriate appeals to the Law, but the point is, if you're going to make a ruling on what usage is *appropriate* or *inappropriate*, you have to make a subjective value judgment (especially if you don't have a good theory and/or you can't replicate the coincidence). A judgment cannot be unbiased if it results in a Law being applied merely as a means of dealing with inconveniences like psi and coincidences.

My opinion on these matters, after 20 years of postdoctoral research, is that we *can* make an epistemological claim for psi and synchronicity (from this point on, I shudder to use the single term coincidence without qualifying it as either meaningful or meaningless), but we only inch toward a viable theory that might underpin them; especially one that is generally acceptable. I'm certain the problem stems from having no solid ontological ground from which to work—I believe any kind of monism misses (or even *dismisses* in some cases) one whole side of reality if it does not recognize more than one aspect to existence. I feel it may be that breakthroughs in our understanding and conceptualization of reality can be made only once we take a more holistic viewpoint—fortunately, parapsychologists and physicists are becoming aware of the possible gains entailed in this outlook.

In closing, Rawlette's *Coincidences* is a substantial piece of work, and there is little to fault it (unless, of course, one goes into the deeper philosophical issues). So much ground is covered, it is truly a useful resource. As a researcher interested in synchronicity for many years, I was pleasantly surprised when the book arrived in my letterbox, and I looked forward to reading *Coincidences*—indeed, the gains have been palpable. Newcomers to the field of coincidences (meaningful and meaningless), synchronicity, and the search for meaning, will not be disappointed, and they should not be dismayed by my critique. As I have implied if not outrightly stated, the key issues covered in *Coincidences* deserve our greatest consideration and attention. The book is well-presented, and typo-free, printed on good-quality paper, and well worth its moderate price.

NOTE

- ¹ The Trickster emerges as an archetypal figure in mythology and as a societal (behavioral) mechanism in most cultures worldwide. Hansen (2001) describes it as a personification of a “collection of abstract properties that tend to occur together,” such as “disruption, deception, . . . , psi phenomena, and marginality” (p. 427).

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