

REFERENCES

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DEAR SIR,

I write in defence of E.S.P. research because I think your reviewer has been misled. Professor Hansel is the latest in a long line of critics claiming to have disposed of this superstition, but like his predecessors he overstates his case. He makes some good points, but his interpretations of events become much less plausible when the full facts are taken into account.

One can readily agree that E.S.P. is scientifically controversial, since there have been no strictly repeatable experiments, no discoveries as to how it operates, and no successes in integrating the phenomenon into rational theory. All the same, a large body of sporadic evidence exists. If all of this must be written off as due to incompetence and fraudulent reporting it follows that on certain topics human testimony is valueless. The pursuit of E.S.P. research may, in the end, lead to just this conclusion, but I do not think we have got there yet.

Evidence for E.S.P. stems from four main sources. (1) Reports of spontaneous impressions in dreams, intuitions and so forth. (2) The occurrence in verbal material from spiritualist mediums and other supposedly "psychic" individuals of information apparently derived by E.S.P. (3) Experiments in guessing at hidden targets using unselected persons as subjects which have yielded slight deviations from chance expectation. (4) Guessing experiments with special subjects who have demonstrated substantial and persistent success in repeated tests under careful scrutiny. Hansel is right to point out that there have been only a few of these outstanding episodes, but by considering in detail only this particular category he contrives to give the impression that the evidence for E.S.P. is more limited than is in fact the case.

Dr. Slater quotes in his review Hansel's criticism of the card-guessing tests at a distance conducted by Gaither Pratt with the high scoring subject, Hubert Pearce. Pratt, who was in charge of the target cards in his room on the top floor of the Duke University physics building, could see from the window Pearce cross the quadrangle below and enter the library where he sat while recording his guesses. Since he was left unsupervised, Hansel supposes he must have crept back unnoticed and peered into Pratt's room through the corridor window. Professor Ian Stevenson, in reviewing Hansel's book (*J. Amer.*

Soc. psychical Res. 1967, 61, 254-267), made an on-the-spot investigation. He found Hansel's published diagram most inaccurate. The bottom of the window in question was six feet from the floor, so the subject would have had to stand on something for hours at a time in a busy corridor. There was a room on the opposite side of the corridor from which, by standing on a chair and looking through the transom and then through Pratt's corridor window, a view might have been obtained, but this was a research room and likely to have been occupied at the relevant times or otherwise locked up. In short, Hansel's explanation was much less likely than it sounded.

Of course, it would have been more sensible to have had Pearce watched, but this experiment took place in the early days of card-guessing before more formal procedures became routine. At the time Pratt could not have realized that results such as this would prove to be so unusual that we should still be debating thirty-five years later whether they occurred at all.

S. G. Soal's work with the subjects Shackleton and Stewart was a more important demonstration since it continued over a longer period and involved more persons and more precautions against fraud. In the Shackleton case Hansel has to postulate a variety of elaborate methods of trickery which would require the collusion of at least three of the other participants besides Soal himself. R. G. Medhurst (*J. Soc. psychical Res.* 1968, 44, 217-232) has rebutted the only instances in which Hansel raised the slightest positive evidence that any trick actually occurred. The most dramatic of these was the assertion by Mrs. Albert, one of the agents who looked at the targets in some of the tests, that she had seen Soal altering figures on the score sheets. Hansel failed to report that photostats of the score sheets showed no signs of significant alterations, or that the lady also asserted that she had smoked one of Shackleton's cigarettes and found it to be drugged, though many others had smoked his cigarettes without ill effect.

Parapsychologists ought not to be blamed for difficulties intrinsic to their material, such as the rarity and impermanence of high-scoring subjects. Dr. Slater considers it reprehensible that such subjects have not been passed from one experimenter to another as an elementary precaution. As a matter of fact, one of the best features of Pavel Stepanek of Prague, the latest star subject, is that he had worked successfully for a succession of experimenters from different countries. One can appreciate why Soal, having spent years looking for subjects, should have hoarded to himself the few he eventually discovered. But even Soal allowed enough to be done by others to show that results did not depend

upon his presence. Parapsychologists have tended to let their good subjects continue far too long with whatever experimental routine proves successful, fearing to branch out into new approaches in case this should hasten the day when the subject ceases to perform successfully. This may account for the fact, noted by Dr. Slater, that electronic testing methods and high-scoring subjects have not been brought together; Tyrrell's work with Gertrude Johnson was an exception. The U.S. Air Force tests, using electronic recording, merely served to confirm what parapsychologists had themselves found, namely that random trials with unselected subjects, electronic or otherwise, rarely produce consistent results.

Continued accusations of fraud by experimenters are inevitable so long as results depend upon scarce and undependable subjects. Even if Pratt had had Pearce closely guarded, Hansel would have explained away the results on the basis of prearranged collusion between experimenters and subjects, as he did in the case of the Soal-Shackleton series. It could be regarded as a point in favour of the parapsychologists that Hansel had to go back to Victorian times to discover an instance of a supposed collaborator giving the game away by confessing. But Blackburn, the man Hansel quotes, was a shady journalist who was several times taken to court for publishing sensational lies.

On other aspects of parapsychology Hansel is even more unfavourably selective. He does much less than justice to the third line of evidence from E.S.P., the attempt to elicit responses from ordinary people. These have been mainly group tests in which individuals have been shown to produce different scoring patterns according to belief, attitude, mood and other psychological variables. He quotes one series of my own in this connection, which produced null results, but makes no mention of two others, conducted jointly with G. W. Fisk, which produced significant results.

On the admittedly dubious topic of "materialization" the reviewer makes much of Trevor Hall's theory that William Crookes colluded with the medium Florence Cook in return for illicit sexual favours. He fails to mention the many reasons for doubting this theory set out by Medhurst and Goldney (*Proc. Soc. psychical Res.*, 1964, 54, 25-157).

Progress in this controversy will not come by trying to please critics like Hansel, but by developing some more dependable experimental technique. At present two methods of approach seem promising. Dr. Montague Ullman at Maimonides Medical Centre has developed a method, using electronic means for monitoring dreams, for trying to influence dream content telepathically with picture targets,

the resulting correspondences being scored by blind matching. Douglas Dean, at Newark College of Engineering, is developing techniques using the plethysmograph, on the hypothesis that a subject's non-verbal responses should be more susceptible to E.S.P. influences than conscious guesses. Both methods have given statistically significant results, but it remains to be seen to what extent they are capable of repetition by other experimenters with different subjects.

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DEAR SIR,

Until such a time as parapsychologists achieve control over the phenomena they purport to study the status of these phenomena must remain a matter of opinion. The important question, however, is to decide whether or not it is still worth while to pursue the problem. On this point Dr. Slater is entitled to his opinion as I am to mine, but the issue cannot be settled merely by regaling us with large chunks from Professor Hansel's polemical book. May I therefore be permitted to point out where, by following Hansel, Dr. Slater has unwittingly distorted the picture?

(1) *The Pearce-Pratt Experiment of 1933*

Here everything hinges on whether Pearce, the subject, could have cheated in the way that Hansel has suggested. Dr. Slater writes "The room in its original state had a large clear-glass window that would have enabled anyone to see into the room at the time of the experiment. This window was about 5 ft. 10 in. from the floor at its bottom edge . . ." Now, I do not know how tall Dr. Slater imagines Hubert Pearce to have been, but it is obvious from this statement that it would have been necessary for him to have stood on a chair to gain a view of the desk where Pratt was seated. How this was done in the corridor of a university department without attracting notice Dr. Slater does not explain, but he goes on to say "Another possibility was offered by a room on the other side of the corridor; from here the line of vision looking through the transom above the door was through the window into Pratt's room and down onto his desk." So it is in Hansel's diagram on p. 77 (which he admits is not to scale). However, Professor Ian Stevenson of the Department of Psychiatry, University of Virginia, who, unlike Hansel, did succeed in obtaining plans of the building as it was at the time and who then visited the site in