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EDITORIAL

During a recent review of some issues concerning the reliability of eyewitness testimony in parapsychology, I was reminded of some fascinating episodes that I believe will interest many *JSE* readers. These episodes concern a familiar criticism of non-laboratory parapsychological data held not only by parapsychological skeptics and those only casually familiar with the field but also by many veteran psi researchers.

Challenges to the reliability of eyewitness accounts typically focus on cases of physical mediumship, poltergeists, and apparitions, in which (we're told) observers ordinarily base their reports on phenomena from darkened séance rooms, or under other poor psychological and physical conditions of observation (e.g., periods of distress or distraction, or objects moving too quickly to be observed and described reliably). Moreover, these are conditions in which observers are particularly liable to misperceive in accordance with their own biases or predispositions in favor of the paranormal. So (we're told), eyewitness accounts in these cases should be treated with great caution at the very least, because they're too liable to be contaminated by observer-bias in favor of the paranormal.

I've discussed this *Argument from Human Bias* elsewhere (e.g., Braude 1997, 2007), even in a previous Editorial (*JSE 28*(2)). I've noted, for example, that even if eyewitness reports are *fallible*, it doesn't follow that they're unreliable to a very high degree, or simply too unreliable to be trusted, *especially in the best cases—precisely those in which observational errors are highly unlikely*. It's important to remember, first of all, that observation reports are never absolutely (or categorically) acceptable. At best, they can only be conditionally acceptable. Granted, sometimes the conditions are clearly satisfied, and so some reports can be highly reliable. Nevertheless, several factors influence whether or not (or to what degree) we accept a particular observation claim. Probably the most important are: (a) the capabilities, condition, interests, and integrity of the observer, (b) the nature of the object(s) allegedly observed, and (c) the means of observation and the conditions under which the observation occurred. When we evaluate reports of paranormal phenomena, we weight these factors differently in different cases. But in general, it matters: (a) whether the observers are trained, sober, honest, alert, calm, prone to exaggeration, subject to flights of imagination, blessed with good eyesight, and whether they have strong prior interests in observing carefully and accurately; (b) whether the objects are too small to see easily, whether they're easily mistaken for other things,

or whether (like fairies, extraterrestrials, and unicorns) they're of a kind whose existence can't be taken for granted; and (c) whether the objects were observed at close range, with or without the aid of instruments, whether they were stationary or moving rapidly, whether the observation occurred under decent light, through a dirty window, amidst various distractions, etc.

I've also pointed out that even if witnesses were biased to experience paranormal physical phenomena, that wouldn't explain why independent reports agree on unexpected and peculiar details, such as the raining of stones or excrement in the homes of poltergeist victims. Moreover, an argument from bias could be used to undermine virtually every scientific report requiring instrument readings and ordinary human observation. After all, it's not just parapsychologists and "plain folk" who have strong beliefs, desires, and predispositions about how the universe works. Mainstream scientists have at least as much at stake and at least as many reasons for perceptual biases as do witnesses of the paranormal. They might even have more, considering how success in the lab can make or break their careers, especially when their research is novel and potentially groundbreaking.

Even more crucially, I noted that there's another respect in which the Argument from Human Bias is double-edged. Obviously, biases cut two ways, against reports by the credulous and the incredulous. So if a bias in favor of psi phenomena might lead people to misperceive, misremember, or to lie, so might biases against psi phenomena. And those negative biases are arguably at least as prevalent—and certainly sometimes as fanatical—as those in favor of the paranormal. So, we adopt an indefensible double standard if we distrust only testimony in favor of the paranormal.

For example, the philosopher C. J. Ducasse wrote,

> . . . . 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, italics in original)

In my earlier Editorial in *JSE 28*(2), I also noted, but didn't illustrate, how the history of parapsychology chronicles some remarkable examples of dishonest testimony and other reprehensible behavior on the part of skeptics. So, since the foibles and sins of the opponents of parapsychology

are rarely given the attention lavished on those of its supporters, a few words on the topic seem in order.

Consider, first, poet Robert Browning's somewhat famous change of heart regarding the medium D. D. Home. Browning had initially been impressed by Home. At the Ealing residence of London solicitor John Rymer, he had been given the opportunity to observe the medium levitate a table in good light, with Home's hands visible above the table. He had also been allowed to look under the table to determine that Home was not using his legs or feet. Browning also observed, among other things, the playing of an accordion that nobody was touching (one of Home's regular phenomena). At the time, Browning admitted that he was unable to explain what he had observed. A month later, however, he was arguing passionately (suspiciously so, in my opinion) that Home had been cheating—but not as the result of any further first-hand experiences with Home. In fact, although the poet never again attended a Home séance, he continued his emotional denunciations of the medium.

The reasons for Browning's sudden about-face are unclear and seem to be rather complicated. It's not simply that he *deliberated* after the fact and concluded that what he observed could only have been due to trickery. Of course, rational reflection may have played a part in the process; Browning may well have harbored philosophical or religious objections to psychokinesis, mediumship, or spiritualism generally. But it seems that his antipathy toward Home was fueled primarily by more down-to-earth matters. For one thing, according to Jenkins (1982:39), Browning "abhorred Home's gentle, effeminate bearing" and the "childishly caressing behaviour" he displayed toward the Rymers (who had assumed the role of Home's British "family"). Jenkins also suggests that Browning so strongly desired total spiritual union with his wife Elizabeth that he could not bear their differing sympathies toward spiritualistic phenomena in general and her endorsement of Home in particular. And no doubt Browning was rankled further by Home's fascination with and attention toward Elizabeth, and perhaps also by the Rymers' refusal to grant Browning a second séance. Others have suggested that Browning's ego was bruised by the fact that at the Rymer séance a garland was placed on Elizabeth's head rather than his own. But whatever the cause, it's clear enough that Browning circulated various falsehoods about events at the séance. Fortunately for historians, in a letter dated two days after that occasion, Browning wrote a detailed description of the events contrasting sharply with accounts he began spreading soon afterward. Moreover, the malice he displayed toward Home was so disproportionate to anything that occurred at or after the séance that one can't help but feel that the poet was moved by something far deeper

and more personal than detection of trickery (see Jenkins 1982:37–49 and Dingwall 1962:101–108).

Of course, Browning was neither a scientist nor a philosopher, and although he was a celebrity he certainly wasn't widely regarded as an authority on the empirically possible. So perhaps his behavior is less reprehensible than that of some of his prominent scientific contemporaries, who unquestionably abused not only their influence as public figures but also the power and prestige of their positions within the scientific community. Possibly the best documented case of this sort, and the episode that inspired this Editorial, concerns Scottish physicist Sir David Brewster.[1]

In 1855, Brewster attended two of Home's séances, first (at the invitation of Lord Brougham) in the home of William Cox and then at the Rymers'. After the Cox séance, Home wrote to a friend in the United States, claiming that Brewster and the others had admitted their inability to explain his physical phenomena by any normal means. The letter was subsequently published in some newspapers, and before long the story of the Cox séance traveled back to London, where Home's letter was reprinted in the *Morning Advertiser*. Brewster then wrote to the *Advertiser*, denying that he had found the phenomena inexplicable and charging, "I saw enough to satisfy myself that they could all be produced by human hands and feet, and to prove that some of them, at least, had such an origin."[2]

Brewster's letter sparked an intense exchange in the *Advertiser*.[3] Cox wrote and reminded Brewster that he had remarked at the time, "This upsets the philosophy of 50 years." Brewster also alleged that he hadn't been permitted to look under the table. Cox denied this, as did T. A. Trollope, who had attended the Rymer séance. Trollope pointed out that Home and Rymer had actually encouraged Brewster to look under the table, which Brewster did, and that while he looked under the table, the table moved apparently without Home's agency. Trollope also noted that Brewster admitted to having seen the movement. Nevertheless, Brewster refused to retract his claim and then added, somewhat revealingly,

> Rather than believe that spirits made the noise, I *will conjecture* that the raps were produced by Mr. Home's toes . . . and rather than believe that spirits raised the table, I *will conjecture* that it was done by the agency of Mr. Home's feet.[4]

It wasn't until 1869, a year after Brewster's death, that the controversy was settled and Brewster's dishonesty revealed. Brewster's daughter published in that year *The Home Life of Sir David Brewster* (no pun intended), in which she unwittingly included an account by her father of the séances, written at the time. Of the Cox séance he writes,

> [Lord Brougham] invited me to accompany him in order to assist in finding out the trick. We four sat down at a moderately-sized table, the structure of which we were invited to examine. In a short time the table shuddered, and a tremulous motion ran up all our arms; at our bidding these motions ceased, and returned. The most unaccountable rappings were produced in various parts of the table; and the table actually rose from the ground when no hand was upon it. A larger table was produced, and exhibited similar movements.
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> . . . a small hand-bell was then laid down with its mouth on the carpet, and, after lying for some time, it actually rang when nothing could have touched it. The bell was then placed on the other side, still upon the carpet, and it came over to me and placed itself in my hand. It did the same to Lord Brougham.
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> These were the principal experiments; we could give no explanation of them, and could not conjecture how they could be produced by any kind of mechanism.[5]

After these revelations, *The Spectator* remarked, rather lamely, "The hero of science does not acquit himself as we could wish or expect." For additional examples of the irresponsible or dishonest behavior of prominent scientists in connection with the case of Home, see Braude (1997).

A different sort of contemporary example is a doubled-barreled offense: (a) magician James Randi's duplicity and evasive dialectic concerning the psychic photography of Ted Serios, and (b) the support of Randi's position by scientists and others who have made no direct study of the evidence. For instance, in a clear abuse of his position of influence, Martin Gardner claimed (*Nature*, *300* [Nov. 11, 1982]:119) that Randi "regularly" duplicates the Serios photographic phenomena, "and with more skill." It may be that Gardner simply and unwisely took Randi's word on this, but the claim, nevertheless, is patently false. Although Randi confidently and flamboyantly accepted a wager from investigator Jule Eisenbud on national television to duplicate the Serios photographic phenomena, in fact he has never even *attempted* to duplicate in public those phenomena under the most stringent—and most relevant—conditions in which Serios succeeded. For more details, see Braude (2007) and my Editorial in *JSE 25*(3).

Few (if any) of us are saints, and few (if any) of us are in complete command of our unconscious hankerings and motives—or even our conscious ones for that matter. And despite their occasional pretentions to the contrary, scientists have neither a monopoly on objectivity nor an immunity to emotional vulnerability. So whether we're looking at the testimony in favor of, or opposed to, the reality of scientific anomalies, a good policy, in my opinion, is to heed the words of Patience Worth: "Have faith in men, but keep thine eyes slitted."

Notes

[1] For more details, see Fodor (1966:37f), M. D. D. Home (1888/1976:36–43), Inglis (1977:227–229), Jenkins (1982:32–36), Podmore (1902/1963 Vol. 2:142–44), Zorab (1975), and especially D. D. Home (1863/1972 Appendix).
[2] D. D. Home (1863/1972:241).
[3] A relatively accessible source for the correspondence is Home (1863/1972:237–261).
[4] Home (1863/1972:247) (italics in original).
[5] Gordon (1869:257–258).

—Stephen E. Braude

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