

BOOK REVIEW

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***The Trickster and the Paranormal*, by George P. Hansen.**
Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 2001, 586 pp., \$36.99 hb (ISBN 1-4010-0081-9), \$26.99 pb (ISBN 1-4010-0082-7).

In *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, Hansen argues that psychic phenomena (psi) have an inherent quirkiness, making them intrinsically difficult to investigate. He refers to this quality as the “trickster,” something not necessarily personalized but coinciding with the trickster archetype found in the folklore of many societies. Although this book focuses on perhaps the most important issue facing parapsychologists today, it is caught in the paradox it reveals. Scientists tend to ignore issues that cannot be resolved, and the trickster, almost by definition, defies resolution. Religious people may label the trickster as demonic, or deny its existence, since it interferes with their belief. Although this book is not for everyone, I strongly recommend it.

George Hansen’s work is scholarly and well-referenced. The sections reveal detailed knowledge of example cases from a wide variety of contexts and cultures. As a result, there is often insufficient space for complete reviews of each topic. This problem is reduced through extensive citation. One value of this book is that it assembles obscure references on topics often overlooked.

This book lacks the linear flow that characterizes most academic discourse. Something funny is going on here. The style is academic, yet quirky, reflecting the trickster’s nature. Hansen’s claims are not proven through analysis but illustrated through examples. In a way,

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this is a form of sociology, similar to the writing of Irving Goffman; but few sociologists would categorize Hansen's work as within their field.

Considering its topic, this book has a strangely "careful" quality. Hansen rarely speculates. Although *The Trickster and the Paranormal* does not fall within an established paradigm, Hansen's background in parapsychology gives him a cautious foundation for evaluating unusual cases. Yet this book does not advocate typical parapsychological positions. Hansen does not fully support either believers or skeptics but offers something beyond standard thinking. This work surpasses others' previous attempts to characterize the trickster's role in modern times.

Hansen covers a wide range of categories with reference to the trickster: mythology, folklore, anthropology, shamanism, prominent psychics, sociological theory, conjurors, alternative religions, hoaxes, governmental disinformation, laboratory research on psi, and literary criticism. It is difficult to summarize this book because it lacks a strong organizing principle. I provide a synopsis through selective quotes:

This book is about foretelling the future, the occult, magic, telepathy, mind over matter, miracles, power of prayer, UFOs, Bigfoot, clairvoyance, angels, demons, psychokinesis, and the spirits of the dead. These all interact with the physical world. This book explains why they are problematical for science. (p. 19)

Several issues are addressed in this book. One is the ongoing controversy over psi's existence – despite extensive research and a massive amount of published data, the scientific debate has continued for over a hundred years. Another issue concerns the unexpected consequences of direct attempts to elicit psi; these are rarely recognized. A third issue is the paranormal's relationship with institutions. (p. 15)

My central thesis is that psychic phenomena are associated with processes of destructuring. If one keeps this rather abstract formulation in mind, the assortment of seemingly disjointed examples will make a bit more sense. I have included a variety of specific instances in order to demonstrate the generality and consequences of the central idea. (p. 16)

Several readers of early drafts of this book found it difficult to perceive an overall theme; the ideas seemed scattered, even incoherent. This is indeed how the trickster appears in our current rationalistic paradigms. (p. 273)

Hansen knows the trickster well; he has seen it up close. When he worked at the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man (now known as the Rhine Research Center) in 1982, he and I coordinated

effects to evaluate the Society for Research on Rapport and Telekinesis. On different occasions, we traveled to Rolla, Missouri, seeking to witness psychic phenomena produced by a spiritualist group. We confronted bizarre events such as rapping sounds from the floor spelling out messages, interacted with sincere people, and gathered evidence implying fraud. Hansen acknowledges the unusual quality of this social environment and dedicates this book to William Edward Cox, the principle investigator of this case. Cox confronted psi as it actually occurred: in field environments where controlled investigation was difficult. Cox (2004) was convinced that he witnessed authentic psi but was unable to compel belief in many others.

Following this line of exploration, Hansen observed the social contexts surrounding psi's incidence. He describes how people in groups react to psi, providing a kind of social psychology of the paranormal:

The primary data of this book concern side effects of using psychic abilities and engaging supernatural phenomena. Those effects can be discovered by analyzing the social milieu around the phenomena. Of particular interest are the repercussions to groups and institutions, including families, academe, governments, science, religion, and industry. There is a pattern, and generally the phenomena either provoke or accompany some kind of destructuring – a concept discussed at length in this book. For instance, the phenomena do not flourish within stable institutions, and endless examples illustrate this

The central theme developed in this book is that psi, the paranormal, and the supernatural are fundamentally linked to destructuring, change, transition, disorder, marginality, the ephemeral, fluidity, ambiguity, and blurring of boundaries. In contrast, the phenomena are repressed or excluded with order, structure, routine, stasis, regularity, precision, rigidity, and clear demarcation. (p. 22)

Hansen expresses optimism regarding the possibility of gaining an increased understanding of the trickster. At the same time, he implies that scientific paradigms may not be suitable. Psi has qualities that thwart its investigation.

This line of research points to testable hypotheses. We can predict the environments where psi will be more prevalent (unstructured, unstable situations with small informal groups of people whose lives reveal fluid cognitive boundaries) and where it will not occur (around people with strong cognitive boundaries in formal, large organizations in rigid, structured environments). Laboratory experiments, where researchers struggle to achieve complete control of an environment, may not be best for investigating psi processes.

For me, the trickster is all too real. It has permeated my life. How can I convey the nature of the trickster? Like Hansen, I relate anecdotes. For example, I witnessed paranormal spoon bending. In 1982, I watched researchers conduct an experiment with Masuaki Kiyota. A spoon was propped up in a manner so that if it were touched it would fall over. Kiyota bent the spoon without touching it, but later it began unbending. Two video cameras set up to document this experiment failed to function and everyone laughed at the absurdity of the situation (the trickster was at work). I felt around the spoon for wires and found none. The spoon continued to unbend while I placed it on a table in another room. I put it in my luggage and later found that it had continued to unbend during an airplane flight. After I photographed it to document my observations, it stopped bending (the trickster avoids verification).

I have witnessed enough deception to realize that my memories of this event could be due to misperception. I have no way to prove the validity of my experience to skeptics. The trickster fools both believers and skeptics, and neither position is always valid. After many similar experiences, I formed the opinion that psi hides (McClenon, 1994). It has characteristics that make it difficult to detect. If proving psi exists were easy, skeptical scientists would verify it and believe as a result.

Hansen's argument goes beyond this. He suggests that the trickster works on social and cultural levels. Groups and even whole societies are affected by the trickster's actions. Even highly reputable people are fooled, and these people can affect history.

Charles Honorton's *ganzfeld* research illustrates this argument. Daryl Bem and Honorton (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of *ganzfeld* studies and concluded that parapsychologists had devised a replicable experiment, proving the existence of extrasensory perception (ESP). The evidence was very clear. The probability that the overall results of these experiments occurred through chance was infinitesimally small. Yet Julie Milton and Richard Wiseman (1999) analyzed later studies and concluded that the *ganzfeld* procedure did not generate replicable results. More recently, researchers have struggled to replicate the effect. In the end, believers and skeptics engage in a rhetorical process; the two sides continue to argue. The trickster seems active even within decades-long research programs.

Hansen notes that established professionals sometimes accept extremely far-fetched ideas as a result of group anomalous experiences. Such collective phenomena can take strange forms and generate unusual reactions. Governmental agencies may engage in

bizarre attempts to generate rumors, conceal findings, and thwart logical analysis. Certain types of unstructured environments seem particularly conducive to anomalous experience. People in small groups within unstructured environments are particularly prone to unusual perceptions.

Does the trickster affect near-death experiences? Kenneth Ring (1984) described convergences within near-death accounts during the era preceding publication of his book *Heading Toward Omega*. Many people providing cases described perceiving social and ecological catastrophes within their near-death experiences. They specified events and years coinciding with each other's accounts. Yet these predictions did not come true. Social scientists note that prophesy often fails; yet people still believe. Is this the trickster at work?

Charles Darwin's evolutionary paradigm allows a way for thinking about anomalous experiences. I argue that biological evolution has shaped the human capacity to perceive such events (McClenon, 2002). This may explain the existence of the trickster. The relation between culture and anomalous experience has been forged through the human use of suggestion within healing rituals. Those people who tend to dissociate have had survival advantages for many millennia: they tend to benefit from healing and therapeutic rituals more than others. As a result, dissociative genes have been shaped by ritual practices, becoming more prevalent. People with the capacity to dissociate tend to experience apparitions, psychokinesis, ESP, and out-of-body and near-death experiences. These perceptions generate belief in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities – the foundations for shamanism.

How is this related to the trickster? Shamanism, humankind's first religious form, often involved deception. The shaman goes into trance and produces "tricks" that generate placebo effects and hypnotic healing. Those who are more open to hypnotic suggestion are more often healed, and, as a result, more often pass on their genes to future generations. In the end, humans increased their capacity to dissociate, to accept therapeutic suggestions linked with trance performance, and to be religious. Rituals, which seemingly facilitate psi experiences, enhanced the human capacity for self-deception. Psi, derived from our collective unconsciousness, became intrinsically linked with the trickster, since collective delusions were therapeutic. When allowed, psi bubbles up among us, leading us to accept religious explanations; but intrinsic to this experience is the capacity to be tricked.

Hansen's discussion of the trickster portrays some of the results of

this evolutionary process. His work focuses on a topic that must be considered if we are to understand anomalous experiences. Through social psychological, anthropological, and physiological research we can further explore this issue.

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