

Fools' Gold? The Challenge of Real World Parapsychological Investigations

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Review of:

Stephen E. Braude, *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xxii + 205. US \$ 22.50 HB.

Stephen Braude is a philosopher whose interests have ranged from demonstrating the inadequacies of mechanistic theories in psychology and cognitive science, through writings on 'philosophical psychopathologies' such as dissociation and dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality), to careful scrutiny of questions about the nature of mental mediumship and the evidence for survival of bodily death. All these topics challenge our conceptions about the nature of the self and the mind/body relationship. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Braude found himself being contacted by individuals claiming extraordinary mental or physical experiences or capabilities. To his great credit, Braude was prepared to get out of his comfortable armchair of philosophical musings and, unlike many parapsychologists (including me) get his hands dirty in the real world by investigating some of these claimants. The *Gold Leaf Lady* describes these adventures, some of which I am sure Braude would wryly admit could more accurately be described as misadventures. But, as we shall see, such is the hazard of real-world investigations.

The book cuts straight to the chase by immediately describing the case of Katie, a Florida housewife who repeatedly found 'gold' leaf spontaneously appearing on her body, often in large quantities. Analysis later demonstrated that the foil was similar in composition to commercially available brass leaf. Although witnesses (of whom there were many) rarely saw the leaf in the process of appearance or manifestation, Katie often demonstrated this phenomenon after rather intimate searches of her body and clothing that appear to rule out the possibility that she somehow concealed the leaf on her person and then applied it to her skin when observers were momentarily distracted. Braude also reports that a skilled conjuror found the flimsy and clingy leaf very difficult to handle and manipulate, suggesting that sleight-of-hand is an implausible explanation for the closely-observed manifestations. It is quite a unique and curious case, but one that fizzles out somewhat unsatisfactorily, as Braude himself acknowledges (p.23). He reports that he has not been able to follow-up further, in part due to Katie's domestic situation (though it is also possible that Katie has herself tired of being the focus of parapsychological investigations).

In the case of the gold leaf lady, we have the first of several instructive examples of how difficult it is to investigate such reports of spontaneous and extraordinary phenomena. The problems seem to be due to what we might call the 'human factor'. Katie apparently has a turbulent and difficult relationship with her husband, which Braude suggests may both be a possible psychogenic factor in the foil's appearance (p.14) and might explain her current reluctance to engage in further investigations (p.23). Braude also describes with almost painful honesty the "colossal fiasco" (p.18) of an attempt by a TV crew to make a documentary film of Katie's case. He infers that the unpleasant atmosphere caused by the director wanting to take certain stock shots prior to working directly with Katie, and the insensitivity of the crew in their interactions with her, caused Katie to be in the wrong frame of mind to produce the foil when her moment in the spotlight belatedly arrived. With regard to the chemical analysis of the foil samples, Braude suggests that he couldn't call in further favours from his chemist colleagues, in part because they lost interest when they discovered the foil was physically comparable to commercially available foil and (illogically, says Braude) therefore not of paranormal origin (p.9) and in part because they might fear their colleagues' ridicule by investigating the possibility of paranormally produced foil (p.23). These seem to be contradictory reasons. However, given the rarity of allegedly permanent paranormal objects (of which the foil could be an example) it is disappointing that Braude has not managed to pursue this case further. Perhaps as a busy academic (for instance, he endured a few years as chair of his department), he simply could not devote further resources to the matter, because such investigations are often expensive, time consuming, and frustratingly inconclusive.

Braude then presents a "historical interlude" (Chapter 2), describing some compelling cases of mediumistic phenomena and setting the historical context for his modern-day investigations. A more plodding author might have had this as an introductory chapter, but Braude is anything but pedestrian and writes with flair and humour throughout. At the same time, he pulls no punches in being strongly critical of the "intellectual dishonesty" (p.xviii) of certain ill-informed sceptics, and he presents with relish several concrete examples of this kind of behaviour (the preface discusses this at length, but the theme recurs throughout the book). He shows even-handedness, however, in also being critical of the overly-credulous enthusiastic proponent of paranormal claims (again, illustrating with concrete examples.)

The next two chapters describe difficult investigations with two claimants, one of whom Braude exposed as fraudulent (the fact that he was a practising magician would give some cause for suspicion, surely). The second claimant demonstrated only suggestive phenomena when tested under controlled conditions. Like the gold leaf lady, the case ended “with a whimper” (p.94), as Braude lost contact with the claimant who, he later discovered, had contracted a fatal illness. Again, perhaps the most challenging aspect of these investigations is the human factor: the supporters of the claimants who, Braude claims, seemed to be deliberately obstructive, making it almost impossible to observe the claimants under properly controlled conditions; the special subject who (twice) took the ‘red-eye’ flight to save money but then arrived for testing in poor physical and psychological condition; the supporter who invited along an audience of guests to observe what was supposed to be a private test of psi, angering and intimidating the claimant; the subject who felt he performed better when he was, quite literally, lubricated with generous quantities of cognac. Braude and other helpful associates put rather a lot of time and effort into these investigations, and examples such as these perhaps start to throw light on the reasons why some parapsychologists prefer to take the more convenient (but arguably more informative) route of testing for psi phenomena under admittedly artificial but tightly controlled laboratory conditions.

Though Braude is trained as a philosopher rather than as an experimentalist, he deserves praise for his attempts to study these special claimants. Most difficulties seemed to emerge when external parties were involved, such as film crews, agents, associates and spouses of the claimant. This made it very difficult to retain control of the testing situation and often led to frustrating and inconclusive observations. Sensibly, Braude aimed to agree to testing conditions beforehand in writing with the claimants, but these agreed conditions were often violated in the chaos that would ensue.

The resulting inconclusiveness of some of the investigations does not undermine the book, because *The Gold Leaf Lady* is not designed to be an exhaustive presentation of the evidence in support of a paranormal interpretation. Rather, it takes the reader on a tour of some of the extraordinary adventures in the life of this philosopher-cum-parapsychologist. Furthermore, the book is peppered with thought-provoking philosophical observations (for instance, there is an entire chapter discussing and critiquing the concept of meaningful coincidence), but also with descriptions of strange and compelling experiences (some of which have been caught on film) that seem to invite a paranormal interpretation.

Braude rightly acknowledges that many of these more colourful instances merely have anecdotal status. Others, such as some of the photographs produced by Ted Serios (a few examples of which are reproduced in the book), really are very intriguing and difficult to fathom. Together, these form examples of what I like to call (with tongue in cheek) my golfing theory of parapsychology. Despite much huffing and puffing and many disappointments and below-par strokes, occasionally the club hits the sweet spot and a beautiful shot ensues. Such rare but rewarding moments provide sufficient incentive to keep the parapsychologist engaged with this challenging field of study, and their ramifications remind us of the wider scientific and philosophical importance of claims of paranormal abilities and experiences. Furthermore, wearing for the moment my ‘teacher’ hat, the methodological challenges that arise when attempting to test the validity of such claims, whether in the lab or in the infinitely more complex and challenging real world, provide a wonderful exercise in creativity, open-mindedness and critical thinking. Readers tempted to conduct their own investigations might do well to consult Wiseman and Morris’s (1995) *Guidelines for Testing Psychic Claimants*. While sceptics have written on *How Not to Test a Psychic* (Gardner, 1989), I think that Braude’s book serves in part to illustrate a complementary point, that is: *How Difficult it is to Test a Psychic*. Despite these difficulties, even when dealing (in the final chapter) with claimants with whom he has a close personal relationship (his wife Gina), Braude’s intellectual bravery and disarming frankness shine through.

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