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In conversation with.... Stephen Braude
An overview of psychical research
in Britain



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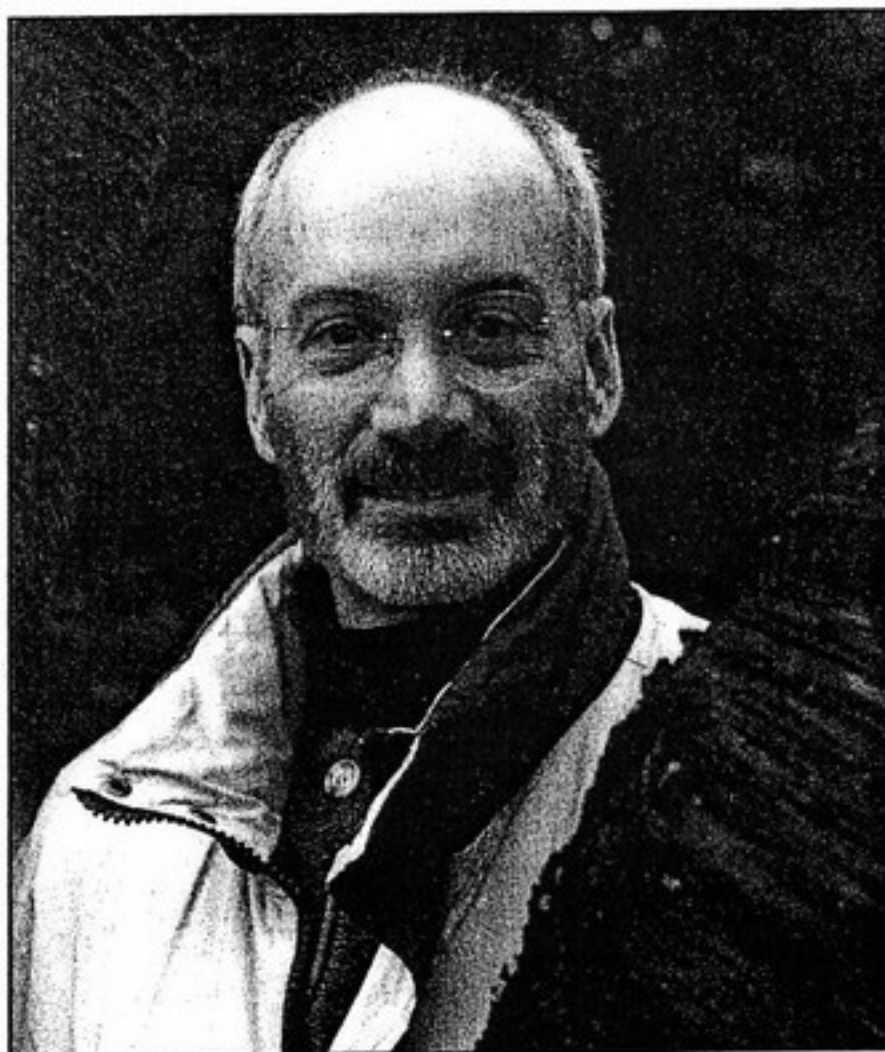
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IN CONVERSATION WITH... STEPHEN BRAUDE

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STEPHEN E. BRAUDE is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Dept. at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. He studied Philosophy and English at Oberlin College and the University of London, and received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Massachusetts¹.



After publishing a number of articles in the philosophy of language, temporal logic, and the philosophy of time, he turned his attention to the evidence of parapsychology to see whether it would provide new insights into old problems in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mind. He has also made a study of dissociation and multiple personality, and has written extensively on their connection both to classic philosophical problems and to central problems in parapsychology.

Prof. Braude is past President of the Parapsychological Association and the recipient of several grants and fellowships, including a Research Fellowship from the National Endowment for Humanities.

He has published more than 50 philosophical essays in such journals as *Noûs*, *The Philosophical Review*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Analysis*, *Inquiry*, and *Philosophia*, and he has written three books: *ESP and Psychokinesis: A Philosophical Examination* (Temple University Press, 1979), *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science* (Routledge, 1986; revised edition, University Press of America, 1997), and *First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind* (revised edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 1995). He is also a professional pianist and composer, and a prize-winning stereo photographer.

IN DOING SOME biographical research for this interview, I was surprised to find that you attended University College London as part of your undergraduate studies.

Yes, I lived here for a year, in 1965/66.

Were you interested in psychical research even then?

No, in fact I used to walk past Adam & Eve Mews every day from my flat near Earl's Court to the Underground to get to University College. I

had no idea what I was passing. It wasn't until later that I got the bug.

How did you become interested in psychical research?

When I was in graduate school; this would have been I suppose 1968 or 1969. At the time I was working on a dissertation on Temporal Logic, and fancying myself to be a hard-nosed materialist. Then one day some friends stopped by and said "Let's have a séance". I'd never done anything of

¹ Stephen Braude's biographical details previously appeared in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, and are reproduced here with kind permission. For further information about this journal, please contact them at Journal of Scientific Exploration, P.O. Box 5848, Stanford, CA 94309-5848 USA, Web page - <http://www.jse.com>

the kind and it was a slow day so I said "OK, let's do it". And for the next three hours I watched my table tilt and spell out answers in response to questions.

There's no way I could describe this that would make a sceptic wither; I can say that it was my table, it went on for about three hours, and I had ample opportunity to examine the table while it was moving. If one of my friends got up to go to the loo, the table continued doing what it was doing before, which made it even harder to explain. I should also say that it was in broad daylight, my friends were not practical jokers, in fact I think they didn't even have a sense of humour, and we were not stoned.

Did your ongoing training affect the way you responded to such an experience? Did you find that you were applying a critical eye to the phenomena, attempting to rule out alternatives?

Well not officially. My friends had done this before, so they weren't as bowled over by it as I was. And to some extent I was willing to go along with it, but part of my mind was wondering what is going on here and actually to some extent I was very frightened by it.

We ostensibly communicated with three entities on that occasion. One was John Wayne, whom I think had recently died, one was the River Styx, so I don't think that was a veridical communication. And the other entity claimed to be the person who had built the house that I was living in which is old for the US (it was a late-18th Century house). I figured: well that's cool, all I need to do is to go down to City Hall and see who built the house — he said his name was Horace T. Jecum, and I figured if I found anything even close to that it would be pretty nifty. It turned out that the house antedated City records; so that was disappointing. But quite apart from that was the movement of the table, which I couldn't explain, and which didn't really fit into any view of things that I was comfortable with.

So really the phenomena that impressed you most were 'physical' rather than 'mental' phenomena?

Yes. There was nothing that impressed me about the nature of the communications themselves, I mean, I knew what ESP was supposed to be, but I did not allow myself the luxury of worrying about it at the time. I was enough of a pragmatist to realise I couldn't speak to my mentors really, except one, about this. And I was more interested in getting my PhD, getting my dissertation done, getting a job, and getting tenure. I figured, you know some day I'll be able to deal with this. So I played the standard academic game until I got

tenure, and then I thought: well, this is the time to read some of the data, and see what some of the well-known philosophers who have had things to say about this, had to say — just to decide for myself whether it was something I wanted to sink my teeth into. So I read C. D. Broad and William James and H. H. Price and decided there was something here worth looking at, and thought I'd test academic freedom.

Was it a conscious decision on your part, as you were securing tenure and working on other projects, to establish an academic foundation that would allow you to come back to study these controversial phenomena?

No, but once I got tenure I realised I could, at least in principle, do anything I wanted. And at that point I was sort of burnt out doing Temporal Logic and I wanted to do some stuff on the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of science that interested me. But not just the same old issues from the same old angles, and so it suddenly occurred to me that I owed it to myself to think about my table-tilting experience, and I figured that it offered a different way to approach some of the same philosophical issues.

Do you feel that your career has suffered as a result of this interest? You mentioned that you had secured tenure before you began to explore these issues; how have things progressed since then?

When I first came up for promotion to full professor there was some opposition to that, but apart from occasional problems of that sort, nothing has really interfered with it. I'm lucky to be at an institution where I can do the sort of thing that I want to do. But I have encountered some examples of intellectual dishonesty and opposition from colleagues in philosophy and elsewhere in the academic community.

Have you come to believe that at least some parapsychological phenomena are genuine, and if so, on what basis?

Yes, I have. Not just from personal experience, but for reasons I outlined in *The Limits of Influence*. I think the evidence is compelling. I don't think there's any intellectually honest way to discount the cases of D. D. Home, Eusapia Palladino and a bunch of others. I think some of the laboratory evidence is compelling — not very illuminating, but compelling.

Is that the chief distinction you'd make between lab work and field work; that lab work may be

equally real but less informative about process or mechanism?

Yes. I'm not sure how informative the fieldwork is yet, but I think it's the only kind of work that is in a position to be informative. In principle I don't think it's possible to do a controlled experiment in parapsychology. Despite what to me seem to be the lame assurances of some that we can get around the *source of psi problem*, I don't think there is any way to get around it. So the most I think we can do with laboratory experiments is just to pile up more (but at this point I think totally unnecessary) evidence, since something anomalous is going on.

That is, unless you can find a superstar subject (which you *can* have in a laboratory experiment), who gets good results in a number of different locations with different experimenters, at least then you have a *prima facie* case for saying this person is part of the causal nexus and you can start doing something like process oriented work. You can start trying to unravel the psychology of psi. Other than that I think you need to look at some of the more interesting spontaneous cases and ask yourself why are the phenomena taking this particular form. I think that's the best you can do and I think that requires a kind of observational sensitivity and sophistication that most people in science — including parapsychology — just don't have.

Would you say that parapsychologists are overly-preoccupied with laboratory work, such that they don't have enough of an appreciation of field work, particularly of historical work?

I actually think I've seen a change in parapsychology since I started making noises about this, 12 years or so ago. Not a major change, mind you, but it seems to me that there's a somewhat wider recognition that the historical evidence might be better than the received wisdom has made it out to be.

Do you think that's been your major contribution thus far to parapsychology, to actually make those issues more prominent, and have people consider them again?

Gee, I haven't really thought about what my major contribution to the field is. I'd like to think that it's equally valuable that I get to play the role of deep nonsense police. So when people in parapsychology who really do not know the conceptual issues involved in the philosophy of mind, or philosophy of science, start waxing philosophical about the meaning of it all, and end up saying things that are not *stupidly* nonsensical

(although sometimes), but usually just *deeply* nonsensical, I at least get to sit atop Mount Olympus and shake my finger and say 'no, no, no, you can't do that'. So I'd like to think I play that kind of useful role.

It sounds as if, in your role as nonsense policeman, you're monitoring how the field is developing and progressing. Has there been any strand of research from the last 15 or 20 years which has particularly impressed or excited you?

I think the experiments with pre-recorded targets have been very nifty. I think they provide a kind of indirect but compelling evidence for at least one sort of super psi. Since I think the idea of backwards causation or the usual temporal explanations (or the observational theories) don't work, I would say it's more plausible to suppose that the experimenter or some collection of individuals are just arranging a complex set of future events to fall out in such a way so that it looks like we've got a retro-PK.

But then that could imply that somebody who precognises a plane crash might at some level be responsible for it?

Well, I think that's certainly one of the options; not the only way to explain precognition without invoking retro-causation, but one of them. Another one involves just drawing inferences from real-time information gathered by ESP. Let me give you an example; if I were an engineer and I walked into a building that was under construction and I looked at the building and I examined the blueprints, I might predict that the building would collapse. I'm not making a categorical judgement: 'the building will collapse no matter what'. What I'm saying elliptically is 'the building will collapse unless...', and then fill in the blank — for example unless we use different materials, or shore up this part of the structure, or something of the kind. And notice when I'm making that kind of inference, I'm basing it on real-time information.

Now the inference doesn't have to be made then and there. If I were the engineer, I could have examined the building, gone home, gone to sleep and had a dream about the building collapsing. So the inference could have bubbled up to the surface in that form. So another possibility — in some cases of precognition at any rate — would be that the subject does some refined, reasonably detailed, real time psychic scanning of the world and reads tendencies and draws reasonable inferences.

One attraction of that kind of model is that it overcomes the so-called intervention paradox, where someone apparently precognises an event that might have happened but which doesn't actually happen because they have intervened. What are more difficult to account for with that kind of model, however, are cases where people seem to have literal visions of a future event that include trivial aspects of the situation. So, in your example, where you use ESP to determine that a building is susceptible to collapse, your 'precognitive' dream of the collapse might incorporate your watching it fall down from a particular position, with certain people walking by. Are you suggesting that people may actually be orchestrating the whole scene; actually causing people to be walking by, to fit in with their dream?

Let me preface my answer by saying I realise how preposterous that might sound. I would say that we have to consider that as a live option. What bothers me about precognition is that I don't think we have *any* good options. I think retro-causation is an appalling option and I think that what Eisenbud calls 'the active analysis' that we've been discussing is in its own way also appalling, though at least it is not conceptually offensive, just morally offensive. And it suggests a magnitude of influence that we might find repugnant. I think another thing that people find objectionable about it is the idea that we might be causing so much havoc and pain in the world, as if that's somehow antecedently incredible. But it's not. There's no doubt that human beings are capable of doing the most horrific things. So the only question is whether your ordinary acculturated human being, who wouldn't think (at least consciously) of harming a child, or committing an act of terrorism, is (at least in the recesses of his or her own heart) capable of the same kind of ugliness. And I'd say there are no saints at that level.

We've talked about some of the research that strikes you as most intriguing in terms of what it can tell us about psi. To counterbalance, can you think of any currently popular strand of research that you believe is unlikely to prove fruitful?

Well, I think most of it is misguided in some way. I think we don't need to do any more laboratory work at this point if all we're trying to do is to accumulate more evidence for the mere existence of psi. That case has already been made, so that further work would be a waste of time. And I think the idea that we're actually going to learn something finer-grained from standard laboratory experiments is still a profound error. As far as the

field studies are concerned, I'd like to see them supplemented by sensitive supplementary investigations into the psyches and the lives of the people involved in the case.

I suppose the nearest we've come to that thus far is probably with poltergeist cases, in which some attempts have been made to study the so-called agent. Do you think they've been successful in helping us better understand the processes that underlie such phenomena?

I think they've come closer, but the same sorts of questions should be extended to other kinds of cases. Why should it just be poltergeist cases where the phenomena are connected to some sort of set of intense needs or interests on the part of a living subject? I was investigating a woman recently who gets images on photographic film. She can just point her camera around and she often gets cloudy shapes, or wispy spaghetti-like streaks. She's married to a man who's manic-depressive and who beats her and abuses her psychologically. At one point she took a portrait of her husband, and in the picture there are these cloudy streaks that spell out the word 'help'. That's just one of the more overtly suggestive manifestations of the kind of thing that I think we should be looking for more frequently in our field investigations.

Do you think many phenomena arise out of deep unresolved tensions?

I wouldn't be surprised. I think one person who has regularly asked the right kinds of questions, though perhaps answered them in a way that a lot of people wouldn't particularly endorse, is Jule Eisenbud, who has looked at cases of ostensible precognition (and psi generally) from a depth psychological point of view. I think that's where the real action is at this point.

One view that might be suggested by such a perspective is that in fact psi is rarely, if ever, a conscious process. Do you suspect then that we are all using psi continually — or even continuously — in a subliminal way, producing rather subtle effects?

I entertain that seriously. I'm not sure that it's right, but I wouldn't be surprised if we found that we are trying to be psychic or do things psychically all the time. But it doesn't necessarily follow that we are being effective — even if thoughts can kill, it doesn't mean that they will. In fact, I think it's almost more miraculous that sometimes we *do* succeed, because if we all tried to influence our surroundings psychically all the time then there must be this enormously complex underlying nexus of at least attempted psychic

interaction, criss-crossing causal chains. And I suspect it's going to be the rare psychic intention that's going to find a clearing in that thicket.

It's easy to give an example that's not psychic. Suppose I'm the world's greatest assassin, and I am assigned to carry out a hit on a particular person. No matter how much of an assassin virtuoso I happen to be, all sorts of things can interfere with me. And not just such things as my intended victim taking precautions and erecting defences and things of that sort. The things that could interfere with my carrying out the 'hit' could have absolutely nothing to do with my particular project; a flat tyre, or an attack of the 'flu, or a faulty elevator, or bad weather, or a mugger.

To extend that analogy, then, it would be more useful if we sent an army of assassins each working independently, so that the outcome would still be achieved. Do you get any sense that there is such a thing as consensus psi? There has been some research, for example looking at whether praying for the health of the Royal Family is efficacious, and more recently looking for group field effects when very large numbers of people are focusing on the same event, such as the verdict in the O.J. Simpson case. Do you think that would be a useful focal point, to look for consensus effects?

It's worth checking out. The problem is that it's hard to determine what sort of large-scale opposition there might be to things of this sort. An example I know John Beloff likes using concerns Hitler. Presumably a lot of people would have wanted Hitler dead, so why didn't Hitler die through the psychic intervention of all his enemies? I think the simple answer to that is first of all not everyone who was superficially one of his enemies was actually one of his enemies, and he also had lots of supporters. He also seems to have had an unusual history of being what we would call 'lucky', so that perhaps a more promising way to go would be to just examine people who seem to be particularly 'lucky' or 'unlucky'. Find out something about their history, to see what might have led to their period of bad luck.

You mentioned earlier that you see no merit in further proof-oriented laboratory work, presumably because those who are not convinced by the evidence now are unlikely to be swayed by yet another significant study. Do you see any value in engaging in dialogue with what might be called 'professional skeptics'?

My concern is that parapsychologists spend too much time, valuable time that could have been spent on research, answering people who aren't really listening to what they have to say. You can't reason people out of positions they haven't been reasoned into. And it may be that people who have made careers out of being skeptics simply have too much invested in not changing their minds. However, I do think there always is a subset of society who are open to the evidence, whatever that evidence might be. And so I think there's always going to be some value in putting the best case out there, and for advancing our own understanding. I can't worry at this stage in my life about being evangelical about the issues in parapsychology. My interest is to be as selfish as possible about it; to advance my own understanding and to do the best work I can. I'll put it out there, and if other people are interested in reading it and following my thought processes, fine, if not it's ok.

What are your own future plans? You're working on another book just now, aren't you?

Yes, I'm going to do a book on survival — it's the last refuge of the chronologically challenged. The more serious reason for waiting to write that book until after writing my other ones is that I think it would have been premature to write a book on survival without having a pretty decent grasp of both the experimental and the non-experimental evidence in parapsychology, to have at least a reasonable idea about the limits of psi. And I also think it's a mistake to try to write a book on survival and evaluate the evidence without having a pretty firm grasp of the literature on dissociation and multiple personality.

This almost suggests that your earlier writing has provided the groundwork for this latest book. Is this the culmination of a career-length trek?

Well firstly I hope that it won't signal the end of my career! Secondly I don't think I had a plan from the beginning — I wasn't that well organised. But I realised when I started investigating multiple personality that this is something I needed to do. Not just because it was interesting in its own right, and relevant to stuff I wanted to do on the philosophy of mind, but because I knew it was something I needed to tackle before I got around to writing about survival. Which at that stage I knew I wanted to write about, but just not yet.

Good luck with the new book and thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.

You're welcome.