

THE PK MAN: A TRUE STORY OF MIND OVER MATTER by Jeffrey Mishlove. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2000. Pp. xx + 283. \$14.95 (paperback). ISBN 1-57174-183-6.

In this book Mishlove tells the remarkable story of Ted Owens, a complex and not altogether admirable person, who called himself "The PK Man." Owens claimed to have exceptionally powerful psychokinetic abilities provided (or at least mediated) by hidden "Space Intelligences" in UFOs. Many parapsychologists already know about this case, and probably many would prefer that it never be discussed or taken seriously. In fact, Mishlove notes that some advised him, for the sake of his reputation, to leave it well enough alone. But Mishlove presents the reasons for taking the case seriously, and in particular for taking seriously Owens's claim that he could control the weather, earthquakes, lightning strikes, sporting events, UFO sightings, and other large-scale phenomena. For more than 20 years, Mishlove painstakingly collected evidence suggesting that Owens could, indeed, do what he claimed, and I'm glad to see that much of this evidence is now available for further scrutiny.

To his credit, Mishlove recognizes that the existence of any PK at all, and certainly large-scale PK, raises intimidating issues of personal responsibility, and he realizes that this fear might play a central role in skeptical resistance to the evidence of parapsychology generally and to the more dramatic cases in particular. The venerable topic of hexing arises in a dramatic way in Owens's case, because Owens frequently claimed to produce his effects in displays of overt vindictiveness. I admire Mishlove for his willingness to confront squarely the less savory aspects of admitting PK into our worldview, and also for discussing the topic of UFOs and their relationship to other parapsychological data (another matter that many in the field would rather avoid).

Quite sensibly, Mishlove realizes that there is valuable parapsychological evidence that resists the procrustean demands of formal experimentation. And I agree wholeheartedly that we might need to assess a psychic's hit rate according to standards similar to those for evaluating athletic performance. It's reasonable to suppose that good psychics, like good hitters in baseball, succeed only a modest fraction of the time.

But it doesn't require an excessive application of the principle of charity to see why the Owens case is intriguing. Owens frequently predicted he would make lightning strike in a certain location, or that he would make UFOs appear at a certain location, or that he would cause sporting events to take an unexpected turn, or that dramatic weather changes would occur within a specified time window. And quite often those forecasts seemed to be fulfilled, some of them (e.g., the lightning strikes) with considerable precision shortly after the prediction was made. One of the more chilling incidents is when Owens predicted, 1 month before it occurred, the space shuttle Challenger disaster.

Mishlove realizes that some of Owens's predictions, especially those about the weather, are difficult to evaluate, and for at least several of the predictions, Mishlove discusses what those difficulties are. He also notes, justifiably, that even though particular predictions will always be vulnerable to skeptical concerns, the Owens case has a kind of cumulative force. Owens made many predictions, about many kinds of events, and as the number of apparent successes mounts, it becomes increasingly difficult to dismiss the case with a glib skeptical flourish.

One moral that we can extract from Mishlove's book, and which Mishlove touches on somewhat obliquely, is the intimate connection between rationality and virtue. Rationality is not simply a matter of entertaining propositions from a detached perspective. Total detachment is psychologically impossible. Hypothesis testing always occurs in a context of needs and interests, and against a background of psychological investment in one's views and pressures to conform. So at the very least, no account of rationality can be divorced from the virtues courage and honesty, and from one's capacity for self-awareness. The Owens case makes these connections clear. Mishlove reports how others struggled with the evidence, and I imagine many readers will feel the struggle within themselves.

Overall, I'm very pleased that Mishlove has written this book. But I would be shirking my philosophical duty to be curmudgeonly if I didn't register some quibbles and concerns. And because I hope the book stays in print for a while (and can appear in new, improved, editions), I have to say that in some respects I found it to be annoying and troubling, both for its substance and its presentation.

First, although I'm the last person to rule out large-scale PK (Braude, 1997), I found myself less impressed than Mishlove by many of Owens's alleged productions. For example, in a chapter devoted to what he calls the "PK Man's Greatest Hits," Mishlove cites Owens's forecast of an unusually warm winter for the United States. But, as Mishlove notes, only some East Coast cities (mostly mid-Atlantic) experienced unusual warmth. In the South, it was miserably cold, with highly unusual snowfall. We have to wonder, then, why Owens's prediction was a hit at all.

When Mishlove discusses Owens's forecast of drought-ending weather in San Francisco in 1976, he considers (as he should) the frequency of similar weather conditions over an extended period. In light of those considerations, Owens's prediction seemed less remarkable than it would otherwise. But in other cases, Mishlove neglects this relevant issue. For example, I wish he had provided information on the frequency of meteorological conditions in Texas that would satisfy Owens's prediction of "freakish weather" (p. 100). Similarly, it's certainly interesting that Owens's predicted 1979 Florida hurricane was the first in 13 years (see p. 131). But there have been a number of hurricanes since (not linked, as far as I know, with any of Owens's forecasts). One would think, in fact,

that it was the 13-year lull that was unusual, not the return of the big storms. Mishlove needs to explain why that isn't the case.

In fact, Mishlove remarks frequently that dramatic weather falling within the broad time frame specified by Owens was more than meteorologists had expected. Now I don't have data on this (however, Mishlove should have provided some), but it seems to me that weather "experts" frequently find their predictions foiled in this way. In fact, in the Baltimore–Washington area where I live, local weather forecasters are typically excoriated for their frequent failures to predict the magnitude (or occurrence) of rain and snowstorms. If meteorology were an exact science, the surprising changes in the weather noted by Mishlove and predicted by Owens might be more evidential. But under the circumstances, it seems we need more than what Mishlove provides.

In some instances, Mishlove missed other sorts of opportunities to strengthen his case. For example, when he considers the plausibility of Owens's claim that he could affect people's behavior, Mishlove mentions Vasiliev's experiments in distant influence. But he could have gone much further—for example, by citing 19th-century antecedents to Vasiliev's experiments, for example, Janet's (1886, 1887, 1888) study of Léonie, as well as Eisenbud's (1992, chap. 6) intriguing discussion of telepathic influence. Similarly, when discussing the possibility that UFO appearances are materializations, Mishlove could have noted how the evidence for collective apparitions supports this conjecture (Braude, 1997). And Mishlove's discussion of the resistance to psi could easily have profited from the considerations raised by Eisenbud (1992).

I couldn't get a clear feel for whether Mishlove accepts Owens's claim that his powers were extraterrestrial in origin. Mishlove often suggests this, and in fact he quotes James Harder's endorsement of this view (without challenge) late in the book, and despite the fact that Harder's reasoning seems specious. But Mishlove also notes the connection between Owens's ostensible PK and other more modest types of PK, which he presumably regards as nonextraterrestrial. Interestingly, Mishlove misses the opportunity to discuss the highly relevant heyday of physical mediumship. One would think the strongest cases from that era could only strengthen his defense of Owens's paranormal capabilities (Braude, 1997). It's unfortunate, also, that Mishlove's book is sprinkled with careless assertions and arguments. They detract from his credibility and might alienate critical readers otherwise prepared to examine the Owens case with an open mind. For example, when he considers the possibility that the UFOs observed by Owens and others were materializations created psychokinetically by Owens, Mishlove claims (or uncritically accepts Owens's claim) that the materialized objects would lack "total physical objectivity" and would be "only partially physical" (p. 79). But why is that? Not all physical objects occupy space in the way a solid body does. Consider, for example, rainbows, gases, electromagnetic fields, mirror images, or (Mishlove's example) holographic

projections. Although these objects are not perceptible in the way solid bodies are (e.g., they are visible only from certain angles, and their tactile and visual properties often differ dramatically), those differences are not signs of their immateriality or subjectivity.

On page 149, Mishlove offers an unclear and unconvincing discussion of the differences (if any) between precognition and psychokinesis. In fact, he says initially that the two phenomena are "not discrete." (And if that were the case, one can only wonder why Mishlove discusses, at length throughout the book, which of the two phenomena Owens was demonstrating.) But a few sentences later, he says that the abilities are "interchangeable" and "two sides of the same coin." But in that case, presumably, they *are* discrete. Moreover, from that last claim, Mishlove concludes hastily that "it doesn't seem unusual that a psychic gifted in one ability would also be gifted in another." However, if one looks over the history of parapsychology, that does seem to be unusual. Gifted precognizers have not typically demonstrated PK ability, and vice versa. Granted, there are interesting and subtle issues about whether precognition should be interpreted retrocausally or according to what Eisenbud (1992) termed the *active analysis*, which posits (among other things) PK and telepathic influence (see also Braude, 1997). But if this is what Mishlove was trying to discuss (both in the passage mentioned and throughout the book), it certainly isn't clear. Indeed, his treatment of the PK-precognition distinction seems quite rudimentary.

One of Mishlove's strangest claims (p. 131) is this: "If Owens is a monster . . . he is no more of a monster than Nature herself. He, after all, did not invent hurricanes or droughts." But I find this bizarre. Would Mishlove also argue, analogously, that a serial killer is no more of a monster than the weapons used in the killings? To make the point very clear, suppose the killer's MO was to stab and maim victims with a toothbrush. Obviously, what's at issue here is a matter of intentionality. Impersonal destructive forces, tools, or instruments of personal hygiene simply don't merit the same sort of moral assessment as an intentionally destructive act (no matter what the instrument of that act is). Ascribing moral qualities to Nature, natural substances contingently lethal to humans, knives, or toothbrushes, is simply a category mistake.

I'm sorry to say that my annoyance with Mishlove's prose grew as I proceeded through the book. I often felt he was treating readers as if they had almost no attention span or were mnemonically challenged. Or perhaps he simply produced the book in haste and didn't think carefully about matters of continuity. But whatever the explanation might be, do we need to be told more than once that James Harder was on Mishlove's dissertation committee (e.g., pp. 29, 117, and again on p. 254), or two pages after first noting it, that Category Five hurricanes are the most intense (pp. 125 and 127)? Do we need to be told several times what the affiliations were of Leo Sprinkle, J. Allan Hynek, Russ Targ, and Hal

Puthoff? By page 197, after numerous references already to his research interests, do we need to be told that Hynek is an "acclaimed UFO researcher"? And by the way, what function does the honorific term "acclaimed" serve here? Who is Mishlove trying to impress, and why? Is this simply a disreputable appeal to authority?

I was also disappointed that Mishlove didn't include references in the text to research listed in his bibliography and that he didn't even include bibliographic references to some of the research mentioned in the book (e.g., some of the experiments from the Rhine Research Center). Even if the book is designed primarily for the general public, it's possible to make it more useful as a research tool for more critical and persistent readers.

In the book's final section, Mishlove urges us to "move toward honest, authentic integration of the depths within us" (p. 265) and practice "mental hygiene" in developing our PK (p. 266). But he avoids one of the really thorny issues about large-scale PK. If (as it seems) PK can be triggered unconsciously, why think we can *ever* bring our unconscious processes (hence, our PK) under moral control? That is one of the issues Eisenbud courageously confronted, and I'm disappointed that Mishlove appears to soft-pedal the implications of his study with comforting, but arguably groundless, New Age assurances about our psychic and spiritual development. This is especially disappointing (and somewhat surprising), because Mishlove defends the insights of psychotherapy and psychiatry against the often glib criticism that these fields lack proper scientific or empirical credentials. But psychiatry and clinical psychology are unlikely to support Mishlove's optimism about taming our subconscious or unconscious.

In the end, I'm left with a nagging concern: What was Mishlove trying to accomplish with this book? If his goal was to present the Owens case in its most persuasive form, he has not succeeded. The book omits important considerations, contains a good bit of oversimplified or sloppy reasoning, and is relatively useless as a scholarly tool (especially for those coming to the subject without a background in parapsychology already). If Mishlove's goal was to make money, he'll probably do well, and I genuinely hope he succeeds. But Mishlove at least professes a sincere interest in putting forward a challenging case that (he claims) has been hidden too long from wider scrutiny. However, the popular audience to which Mishlove's book seems directed is likely to be antecedently sympathetic to the Owens case (or at least to much of it). Now presumably, Mishlove wasn't interested simply in preaching to the converted, or so it appears. But then, he needed to write a more scholarly and carefully reasoned book. As Dean Radin (1997), for example, has shown, it's possible to do that and still produce something readable.

Moreover, if Mishlove really is preaching to the converted, then the book may not be as courageous as it appears. It may simply (and predictably) be ignored by serious researchers, who might dismiss it from the start as an example of pandering to an all-too-gullible New Agey public.

(And I have to add: What sort of reader does Mishlove think will be impressed by Saul Paul Sirag's outlandish suggestion that Plato's Allegory of the Cave contains an early form of hyperspace theory? That claim shows no grasp at all of Plato's epistemology.) One would think that if Mishlove had really wanted to take on the intellectual establishment (whether inside or outside parapsychology) and challenge them with the issues potentially raised by the Owens case, he needed to produce a deeper, clearer, and more careful work. Ironically, like Owens, Mishlove may have been his own worst enemy here. In several respects this book seems optimally tailored to alienate those members of the scientific and academic community who are in the best position to promote and lend credibility to the case, and also to carry out future research into large-scale PK.

The Owens case and the issues it raises are extremely challenging. No serious student of parapsychology can afford to ignore them. So despite its shortcomings, I consider this book mandatory reading, and I hope it stimulates open and courageous discussion of some very tough questions.

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