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The investigation of the paranormal

(Part two of a two part discussion of science and pseudoscience)

"In all my years of looking into these areas, I never yet to discover one genuine example of ESP, psychokinesis, survival after death, precognition, out-of-body travel or indeed any other paranormal effects from bim or due to a lack of enthusiasm. It is due to a lack of talent on the part of the claimants." These are the words of James Randi. In my last article I discussed Mr. Randi's position on the paranormal and his association with the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science), where he is a member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. I portrayed Mr. Randi as a "conjuror among scientists," but there are in fact many "conjurors" among today's scientists. Mr. Randi is unique because of the stand he takes on the paranormal; while most of the other conjurers are trying to sell their wares, Randi is exposing the sleight-of-hand behind the magic.

The scientific community can no longer investigate the paranormal, like any other unexplained physical phenomena. However, para-psychologists claim that controls and constraints interfere with their powers. Assuming that these powers are in fact real, if the process cannot be studied, then how can we learn about it?

1980 AAAS Annual Meeting included a Symposium on Science and Pseudoscience. Various cases were related where the conjuror was tested under conditions. For example, one man who did card tricks was studied. He was told that there would only be one camera monitoring his hands at all times. This camera was stationed directly in front of him. He asked for a "warm-up" session with the camera off and proceeded to amaze his audience of scientists. He performed equally well with the camera on and neither the monitor nor the observers found any sign of legerdemain.

There were three more cases related to other claimants. These are the pure scientific interest and possible military uses. (If a man can load two cars with his hands, can he also control them?) It turned out that a few of these experiments were not conducted with Uri Geller. One of Geller's claims is that he has the ability to make a lighter "count" by simply concentrating on it. SRI didn't have a lighter that could achieve better positive results. After a few hours of this everyone was getting bored, so they relaxed more constraints and let Geller hold the counter. Still nothing. Finally Geller suggested that if he brought the counter up to eye level and had better body contact by holding it with both hands he could achieve better positive results. At this point they just wanted to see something, so all conditions were relaxed and Geller was allowed to do what he suggested. (Besides someone would have to really stupid to plant a source in their nose or mouth.)

Geller brought the tube-counter to eye level and dangled it tightly with both hands. He seemed to be rubbing the tube and it smashed to the floor. Geller himself recoiled in shock, and I do mean shock. He had "accidentally" assured the base of the proportional counter and got the full potential of a few thousand volts. One of the scientists attempted to help him up, but Geller resisted in fear and exclaimed, "I dare to be different. Stand out from the crowd. Think different. Make your own rules. Equus, the uncon-trolled. XX, the limit. Don't just accept what's offered. No matter what you're offered, always ask for more."