Paranormal is not science

To the Editor:

In response to John Molitorno's article "The Investigation of the Paranormal" in last week's Tech, I would like to say that I am in full agreement with Professor Wheeler that the Parapsychological Association should be ousted from the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science). Mr. Molitorno opposes this move on two grounds: first, he states that there is at least some evidence for the validity of "paranormal" claims, and second, he believes that keeping the Association inside the AAAS will maintain certain restraints on the organization — by allowing members of the AAAS to judge the scientific value of claims — which would otherwise not be possible.

The first argument is the more fundamental, so I will deal with it first. Mr. Molitorno very clearly portrayed the legendman involved in some of the so-called "paranormal" events. Yet he still leaves the door open for the existence of such events: "... Even if 99 percent of all paranormal claims are bunk, what we can learn from the 1 percent is worth the effort." My question is, where is the slightest scientific evidence for even that 1 percent? The fact is that not 99 percent, not 99.9 percent, but every valid scientific experiment that has sought to prove the existence of such phenomena has failed to do so. (See ESP: A Scientific Evaluation, by C.E.M. Haned.)

The two examples of such phenomena that Mr. Molitorno cites are easily disposed of. The case of the San Francisco policeman is one of a number of such cases reported over the years. These are not scientific experiments because they do not account for and control some obvious possible confounding variables. For example, little weight is given to the fact that a trained police officer can tell many things about a person by meeting him, and using that knowledge can predict what the person will do. (His knowledge of the city will tell him what the person is likely to see while doing it.)

The case of Uri Geller and the SRI tests has been fully exposed in James Randi's book The Magic of Uri Geller. Those tests were a ludicrous sham, with the scientists initially relaxing constraints because — in Mr. Molitorno's words — "they just wanted to see something." Actually, the one strain in these tests was no relaxed only after hours of seeing nothing. They were released from the beginning. The SRI scientists allowed an assistant of Geller's to have free run of the premises, and this associate could easily have telephoned to Geller the 9 digit number that Geller allegedly predicted unaided from the distance of his hotel room.

Given the pseudo-scientific status of most "paranormal" claims, one cannot accept Mr. Molitorno's argument that keeping the Parapsychological Association in the AAAS will allow the AAAS to keep the Association in check. Since the very phenomena which the Association claims to study have not been proven to exist, there is no justification for continuing to grant it the unearned sanction of the organization devoted to the advancement of science. That would be logically equivalent to the AMA allowing "faith healers" in as a means of insuring that future experiments with such techniques were in accord with established medical practice.

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