

Review of George P. Hansen's *The Trickster and The Paranormal*

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This book is an ambitious examination of the sociology of the paranormal. It is an accomplished effort to situate the problematic of psi in the context of some leading currents of modern thought, drawing liberally on the ideas of Max Weber, Victor Turner, structuralists, deconstructionists, anthropology, philosophy, and a good deal more. For Weber, social evolution is the product of two converging, though antithetical, forces: charisma and rationalization. The direction is toward greater rationalization, in which charisma and supernatural power are progressively institutionalized and domesticated. History is a trend toward disenchantment—away from magic, miracle, and the supernatural. This bodes ill for parapsychology, which we might characterize as an attempt to make a science of enchantment, an oxymoronic venture by Weber's lights, which therefore can only draw the quixotic few to its ranks.

Even in its least reputable guises, the paranormal is intellectually very provocative stuff and deserves to be looked at against a wide theoretical canvas. Others have sought a wider canvas, and I will mention a few examples. Krippner (2002) has attempted to situate psi in the postmodern world; so has Griffin (1997), who in particular tried to establish links with the process philosophy of Whitehead; Braude (1986) has done various analytic and reconstructive services for psi, for example, its connections with the multiple personality (a trickster-related motif), the importance of spontaneous cases, its destructive (and therefore trickster) machinations, and so on. F. W. H. Myers perhaps was the most daring and comprehensive conceptualizer of psi.

George Hansen's focus is on the sociophilosophical dimensions of the paranormal. As I interpret it, one of the most interesting implications of his analysis is that the dream of parapsychology that it one day join the respectable ranks of the great normal sciences is most likely doomed to disappointment. If Hansen is right, the fate of parapsychology is to remain forever a marginal enterprise. The reason is that psi, and all those who get too close to its subversive effects, are apt to fall under the spell of the trickster archetype. As the title indicates, the trickster is key in this massive 564-page study. The trickster is an archetypal personification of a cluster of interrelated ideas, properties, and tendencies.

Among them are tendencies toward liminality, deception, disruptiveness, boundary-crossing, and antistructure—ideas explored at length in this book. In broadest terms, psi tends to undermine structure, status, hegemony, institutionalism, and rationalization, all preconditions for parapsychology becoming an established science.

The first three parts of the book, up to page 116, lay the groundwork, drawing on psychology, sociology, and anthropology to elaborate the incredibly rich and ramified concept of the trickster and its relation to the paranormal. Psi is thus implicated with such ideas as marginality, clowns, fools, hoaxing, sexual disinhibition, paradox, contradiction, ambiguity, alienation, transition, instability, danger, and elusiveness. As an archetypal constellation, Hansen treats the trickster both as a congeries of abstractions and as a powerful, sometimes inspiring, sometimes destructive, and often possessing psychological force.

One of the book's chief virtues is that it explores in detail the various venues in which the trickster constellation relentlessly foils the scientific dreams of parapsychology. It is impossible to review much of this in any detail, but some of the topics covered include: famous, popular, and prominent psychics; conjurors; CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) and debunking; the role of the paranormal and small groups like SORRAT (Society for Research in Rapport and Telekinesis) and the Kubler-Ross circle; psi and various religious sects; psi and institutions such as academe and the entertainment industry; the history of psychical research; hoaxes, government disinformation, and something the author calls "unbounded conditions," including cattle mutilations, UFO flaps, and Big Foot sightings.

In all these venues, Hansen shows how the trickster loves to collapse the distinctions that sustain the structure of the world—distinctions such as real and unreal, genuine and fraudulent, objective and subjective, truth and falsehood. In the presence of the trickster, all categories blend promiscuously into each other in a continual riot of boundary-crossing, forgery, and facsimile. The drama of psi inevitably brings with it an element of noir, shadow, and ambiguity. Government involvement in psi research, for example, has largely been confined to interests in spying, thus forcing participants to play necessary but utterly confounding games of disinformation. The psi-trickster element in ufology renders that field of inquiry even more marginal, dangerous, and repulsive to anyone who aspires to rational and intelligible forms of life and thought.

Hansen argues that an element of fraud and disinformation is not incidental but virtually essential to psi, as it is to spying. There is an implication for survival research here. Although it follows from the nature of the trickster that fraud may be subconscious as well as conscious (or both), Hansen pays little attention to the curious mixture of unconscious mythmaking and veridical psi often found in mediumship. Although he does not explore this question in detail, the trickster explains why mediums may cheat, consciously and unconsciously, and yet at the same time also produce veridical psi, and even evidence for survival. Mediums, like shamans, are at home in these deconstructed spaces. Understanding the necessarily devious role of the trickster sheds light on this difficult branch of psychical research.

Hansen notes an important paradox: the fact that while the paranormal elicits enormous popular interest, and blends quite comfortably with an immensely profitable entertainment industry (movies like *The Exorcist*, *Sixth Sense*, and *ET* make millions), the amount of financial support for scientific research of psi is practically nil. Elite scientists mostly scoff at or back off from the subject. This also bodes ill for parapsychology. For it suggests that if you want money to do research, you cannot at the same time research what would be fatal to the bureaucratic culture that creates and manages money—which is what parapsychology, in any way dramatically successful, would in effect amount to. It follows that parapsychology will always be the sport of the eccentric rich, and parapsychologists will always be condemned to court the plutocrats and beg for a pittance to do their research.

This brings me back to survival research, for note a parallel paradox: The current U.S. military budget is roughly \$350 billion, all dedicated to the technology of death. Contrast this with the funds available to do research on the conscious survival of death. Did I hear an amused snicker? But all this makes perfect sense, according to Weber's and Hansen's logic: For life *after* death would collapse the binary *opposition* of life and death, one of the mightiest pillars of our social and economic structures. Why would economic status, structure, and privilege choose to disrupt its own self-confirming worldview? Keep the trickster psi safe and tame under the guise of horror flicks, harmless in the form of New Age bromides, and the smooth road to disenchantment remains unobstructed. Spending billions on a military budget designed to maintain our status as the world's sole superpower and superstructure is perfectly rational. The more we spend and the more we maintain the binary oppositions—life/death, good/evil, us/them—the more we buttress structure and rationality, and thus our superior status and extravagant financial power. To understand why there is little interest in the scientific study of life after death, we have only to ask: What would happen to our angst-driven, Hobbsean-paranoiac power structures, if the distinction between life and death were dissolved by proof of life *after* life? This is like asking: What would happen to our legal, governmental, military, religious, psychiatric, and entertainment industrial complexes, if a radically effective pill, formula, or philosophy of love, courage, and ecstasy were unleashed on the world?

The first four parts of the book illustrate the trickster in action and may be summarized by a paradox. Despite enormous popular interest, in part due to continuous reports and claims of psi experiences from ordinary people, “for most of the past 100 years in parapsychology, there have been no more than 5 to 10 persons employed in full-time research at any one point....The level of institutionalization and bureaucratization of parapsychology is miniscule compared with other sciences, but the hostility it provokes is extraordinary” (p. 201). This is a prescient observation. The hostility is due not merely to the threat that psi poses to the prevailing scientific materialism of our culture but to far more radical destabilizing influences. This reviewer, for example, can imagine nothing more destabilizing—nothing more

terrifying—than a reliable and therefore self-augmenting technology of psi. Crime, war, and personal vendetta would acquire tools of unprecedented destructive power. Dossey (1997) already reminded us of the dangers of destructive prayer. However, the first step toward entering this new age of horror would be for parapsychology to produce its first repeatable experiment. In effect, the “psi-ring of Gyges” would be loosed upon the world, and there would be no turning back (Grosso, 1989).

Chapter 21, “Laboratory Research on Psi,” is an excellent account of the empirical picture of psi, calling attention throughout to the trickster features of psi. It also does a fine job describing the relationships between theories of psi introduced by Helmut Schmidt, Evan Harris Walker, Rex Stanford, and William Braud. I think, however, that this chapter should have been placed much closer to the beginning of the book, before the general account of the trickster constellation. In this way, readers not acquainted with the data of parapsychology would gain an immediate impression of what the fuss is all about and why the trickster is such a useful family of concepts for elucidating psi phenomena.

Parts 5 and 6 deal with a number of seemingly disparate theoretical topics such as reflexivity, totemism, imagination, and paranoia. In each instance, however, Hansen aims to exhibit the deconstructive traits of the trickster archetype. The chapter on reflexivity seemed to me the least satisfying, largely because of what it failed to say. Reflexivity—thought thinking about thought, logic used to examine logic, a science examining its assumptions—all these undermine structure, the difference between subjective and objective, for example. Reflexivity “exposes foundational assumptions that are usually banished from conscious awareness” (p. 307).

This last quote might serve as a very good definition of philosophy, but Hansen displays a curious antipathy to philosophy throughout this book, as when he says things like: “The field was long afflicted with philosophers and others who offered opinions, ideas and speculations, but had little contact with data” (p. 331). In the first place, this caricatures what philosophers really do; in the second, relations between parapsychology and philosophy have long been cordial, and philosophers from Henry Sidgwick to Hoyt Edge have immersed themselves in the data and made contributions to the field. Philosophers have influenced models of psi research; Honorton, for example, relates the internal attention states model to Bergson’s ideas (Honorton, 1977).

Hansen’s antiphilosophical stance is self-contradictory, for he relies on philosophers throughout, from Charlie Dunbar Broad to Jacques Derrida. In fact, with its probing conceptual juggling, *The Trickster and the Paranormal* is nothing if not a philosophical essay, only without the professional skills and reflexivity of a trained philosopher. More important, it is a stance that constrains the author’s thinking; for example, just a few pages after the above swipe at philosophy, Hansen writes: “Macro-PK phenomena have received little attention from laboratory researchers, who view them with suspicion because of their frequent

association with fraud” (p. 335). Here it would have been apposite, and useful, if Hansen cited Braude, who discussed just this neglect of macro-PK phenomena. Moreover, what engages Hansen about literary criticism is an essentially philosophical concern; thus he writes in his summary of that chapter: “Probing foundations and questioning basic assumptions are the beginnings of liminal conditions” (p. 390).

The chapter on imagination brings in the ideas of James Hillman and Henry Corbin; imagination points to the relative provincialism of Weberian forms of rationality. Hansen observes that studies show “high status professional males” (p. 401) are deficient in capacity to produce imagery. Because high-status professional males are the guardians of structure, we have another reason why parapsychology, which explodes the limits of the imagination, is doomed to marginal status. The last brief chapter is on paranoia, and the idea in general is that psi can induce paranoia for various reasons, and yet paranoia can also sharpen our consciousness, as Salvador Dali proved by his critical paranoiac method of painting. The lead epigraph of Hansen’s book reads: “The coyote is the most aware creature there is...because he is completely paranoid.” (A quote impishly selected from the ravings of Charles Manson.) But if Hansen knew the data here, he might not have chosen this as his lead epigraph, for the heightened awareness of paranoia, as David Shapiro (1965) shows in *Neurotic Styles*, is warpingly *narrow*.

I have a tip for the reader. This is a very large volume, and on the author’s repeated admission, a seeming “hodgepodge” of ideas. So, in addition to the helpful introductory chapters, I recommend leapfrogging to chapter 26, “Conclusions,” for a wonderfully lucid and bracing summary of what seems to me the essence of this book. One can then work one’s way back into the rich material crammed in between.

In general, this book is well written and most of the time strikes a balanced tone. For example, despite UFO researcher Bud Hopkins bashing Hansen, Hansen offers a fair and generous assessment of Hopkins’s work. Hansen uses short sentences and has a knack for clarifying opaque and recondite ideas. From the point of view of making an impact on the reader, however, extensive and sometimes wholesale editing would have helped. Not because the editable material is without interest or value but because it retards the argument and blurs the effect. The material on literary theory, the transition from structuralism to deconstructionism, the frequent introductions and opinions about the various personalities canvassed, all would gain from severe pruning. The extremely long discussion of Martin Gardner seemed unwarranted, although it would make a nice independent essay elsewhere. I am not urging condensation at the cost of distortion but eliminating the unnecessary.

One last critical comment. The concept of the trickster is multifaceted. Once you become proficient in its connotations, there is a danger of seeing it at work everywhere, and there is the temptation of applying it indiscriminately, and with too ready facility, with the

effect of serving up pallid abstractions instead of living insights. Hansen slips into this trap relatively rarely, and here again I would invoke the editor's stiletto as remedy.

Overall, I consider *The Trickster and the Paranormal* an original, wide-ranging, and provocative exploration of a difficult, fascinating, and very important subject. Hansen offers a multitude of fresh perspectives for approaching the many phenomena of psi. As I read the central message of the book—others will have their own take—the paranormal is here to stay, and it will forever remain an outsider, a rebel, and an outlaw to the existing order of mind, nature, and society. The question Hansen does not address is what to do about this most curious situation.

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