

## BOOK REVIEW

**Dangerous Pursuits: Mediumship, Mind, and Music** by Stephen E. Braude. Anomalist Books, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-949501-15-5.

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<https://10.31275/20201955>

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Stephen Braude is the most prolific of the late 20th- and early 21st-century philosophers writing about parapsychology, and his work in the philosophical aspects of parapsychology has been the most influential in this field for the past several decades. This book encompasses both philosophical issues in parapsychology, as well as studies in spontaneous and mediumistic investigations, and this collection spans the spectrum of his interests, including jazz.

His title is an apt warning about the dangers to academics pursuing work in parapsychology; however, some suspicion toward those of us in the field can be mitigated if one produces excellent work in the field of one's doctorate before tenure decisions, as Braude did.

*Dangerous Pursuits* is composed of previously published articles or book chapters, but they are usually substantially rewritten in a way that makes these chapters accessible to a wide range of people, not only academics. Although the book is not divided into sections, the chapters are nevertheless arranged skillfully to focus, after an opening chapter on the fear of psi, a topic that Braude returns to throughout the book, on physical mediumship, then more generally on mediumship, and finally on more theoretical topics, with a coda on jazz.

The great pragmatist William James suggested that studying the more unusual human experiences might give us a better, and certainly a more expanded, view of humans, and *Dangerous Pursuits* gives us a good taste of some of these experiences. How we react to

them, however, is another matter, based on what Braude calls one's "boggle threshold." Braude is an extraordinarily careful thinker, and he bases his own boggle threshold on his examination of the evidence, as well as, perhaps, on the college experience he had with table tipping. Many parapsychologists have become interested in the field through their own psi experiences. I have not. I have not witnessed any physical mediumship manifestations that I considered genuine and have witnessed some that were clearly the result of sleight of hand. I experienced initially the best subject, in my first experiment, engaged in fraud, and I routinely gave "displays" of ESP and PK in my first classes in my parapsychology courses having worked up these magic tricks with very little practice, yet students were taken in; perhaps these events have given me a lower boggle threshold than Braude. None of this, of course, undercuts his carefully made arguments. It simply means that all of us who read the book may come away with differing conclusions.

Let me describe some major arguments in the chapters, but, needless to say, these chapters contain a great deal of subtlety that deserves closer inspection, and I recommend that you confront the entire set of arguments.

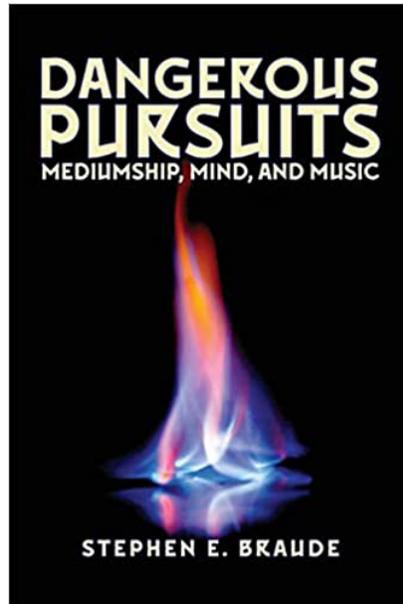
His topic in Chapter 1, the fear of psi, has been discussed for a good while in parapsychology, especially by Charles Tart, but Braude's approach differs in that he pushes us to consider not simply the possibility of expanded psi in the lab but in mediumistic sessions, particularly examining the phenomena produced by D. D. Home, and especially the accordion playing during some of Home's sessions, a feat that Braude says occurred under excellently controlled conditions. The chapter serves as an appropriate argument for seriously considering all of the mediumistic sessions described in the following chapters, so this chapter is pivotal for the rest of the book.

The next two chapters comprise almost 30 percent of the book and are dedicated to his field investigation of The Felix Experimental Group (FEG) beginning in 2010 with an informal cabinet session with few controls. Over the course of several years, Braude was able to introduce stricter controls within the sessions, which he describes in detail along with the disappointments in his not being fully successful in introducing more controls. Indeed, at the end of this chapter,

Braude comes to a semi-skeptical conclusion and hopes for better controlled experiments.

Here, it is useful to point out a recurring difficulty: If the medium asserts, as in this case and many others, that belief in her abilities on the part of all participants is a necessary condition for the phenomena to appear, a tension is introduced when the experimenter demands a more controlled experiment. Even if the experimenter does not lack belief, at least the medium may think that he does precisely because of the importance the experimenter places on strict controls.

The third chapter chronicles additional sessions with FEG, here finally attempting to get good video evidence of the purported phenomena, including table levitation, unusual rappings and noises, and ectoplasm. Braude examines and rejects arguments that these were done through sleight of hand, and he has a photo of purported ectoplasm in the book, although Braude admits that the ectoplasm disappeared while the medium was in his cabinet, thus reducing its evidential value. Further, in these sessions, they never got good video evidence of any of the best table levitations, although through enough good sightings by Braude and his experimenters, as well as a GoPro video, he believes that he can confirm that this phenomenon occurred. Braude is always level-headed in his examination of the evidence, becoming convinced that at least on some occasions, the medium used a magician's device to produce strange lights. In my reading of anthropological reports about healing as well as in the history of mediumship, it seems that many of the best subjects revert to sleight of hand on some occasion, and it is an interesting question whether that should automatically disqualify them or cause one to reject outright all of the phenomena; I side with Braude that these events call for even



more careful controls but do not automatically move to a fully skeptical conclusion.

Chapter 4 is an examination of the mediumship of the Brazilian medium Carlos Mirabelli. It strikes me as a kind of Gestalt test of mediumship, whether the observer sees sleight of hand or the genuine article; was Mirabelli genuine or was he a fake? Rather than sessions observed by Braude (since the medium died in 1951), Braude is in “conversation” mainly with Eric Dingwall and Guy Playfair in their analyses of Mirabelli’s phenomena. Braude argues that at best it is a case of “mixed mediumship” where the medium definitely committed fraud on some occasions but appears to have at other times displayed genuine phenomena. The best case for Mirabelli was the materializations in bright light, in front of a large number of people, and under good controls, which, Braude concludes, resist easy skeptical dismissal.

The shoddy skepticism that Braude discusses in Chapter 5 is found in Trevor Hall’s book on D. D. Home, whom Braude thinks is the best example of a successful, carefully vetted medium. After spending time criticizing Hall’s “dishonest skepticism,” Braude turns to examine Home’s best evidence as opposed to Hall’s criticism of Home’s weakest evidence. He points out that Home displayed large-scale phenomena under controlled situations in places he had never been, and he was never caught in fraud in his 25 years.

Having given nodding approval to Home’s amazing phenomena, Braude rightly (and with his first chapter on the fear of psi in mind) turns now to the question of super psi. What are the limits, if any, to psi, even given the astronomical effects found in meta-analyses of quantitative studies (which Braude downplays, calling them “marginally compelling”); why is our boggle threshold so low, Braude wonders, for mediumistic phenomena? Why are we willing to use the super psi hypothesis so readily to deny the possibility of postmortem survival based on mediumistic evidence by asserting that it can be a form of super psi on the part of the living?

The first problem Braude considers is whether there is even a good definition of super psi, denying it and saying it roughly refers to psi that is not seen in quantitative studies. But is there any good reason to doubt that psi phenomena can manifest beyond what is found in quantitative studies, besides simply saying that one has a low boggle

threshold? No, says Braude; psi may, for instance, function below the surface in everyday life. He says, “at our current level of understanding, super psi is as viable as puny psi.” Rejecting arguments against super psi, he asserts that we have to decide whether we take seriously super psi as opposed to rejecting it, both sides being “weakly unfalsifiable,” and so we have to turn to pragmatic criteria as well as to better studies of the use of psi unknowingly in everyday life. However, because of the lack of a clear standard of what makes a particular event super, we should abandon the phrase “super psi.”

This chapter is a nice segue to the next, dealing with mental mediumship in the context of a careful examination of the factors involved in postmortem survival; in particular he focuses on the problem of personal identity as a way to examine the viability of personal survival. For instance, can a person (in the sense that we understand the term) exist without a body? In a careful examination of our use of “person,” he points out that because of cultural variability, for instance, we can’t say that our ordinary use of the term picks out a “natural kind” (i.e. a piece of ontological furniture), and we are left with Ducasse’s pragmatic solution as to how we would use the term. Say you received a call from a friend whom you had heard had died in a plane crash. If she is able to tell you of events and information that only you and she are privy to, wouldn’t you say with justification that you are talking to that person? But isn’t this what happens in the best cases of mental mediumship?

Having established that it is appropriate to refer to a postmortem person (i.e. it is not illogical), Braude turns to a focused examination of super psi (or Living Agent Psi, or LAP, a better term according to Braude). He is not impressed with much of the discussion of survival and argues that LAP is a plausible explanation for the cases presented in the literature. On the other hand, rather than being satisfied with this conclusion, he offers what would be an ideal case of mental mediumship, in which case it would be “irrational” in some sense not to conclude that communication is from postmortem survival; unfortunately, we have no case that fulfills this ideal case. So, postmortem survival is possible, but we do not yet have a case that would fully justify us drawing that conclusion.

If we can postulate that postmortem survival is a possibility, we are confronted with another problem; ordinary perception takes place from

the perspective of a physical body, but if there is no physical body, how can there be perspective in the experiences in postmortem survival? With his usual careful analysis, Braude concludes that postmortem experience can be like clairvoyance in which one can, e.g., read a page from a closed book, an example of non-perspective perception. But this gets us into another problem: If postmortem survival is like clairvoyance, then it seems to encourage us to adopt a LAP explanation for mental mediumship. This is not to deny postmortem survival, but it points out the implausibility of survivalists denying the possibility of LAP.

One thing that is clear from the detail and carefulness of Braude's arguments in the book is that he is honest, and I have to say that his characterization of the next chapter's topic, "A Grumpy Guide to Parapsychology's Terminological Blunders," is honest. It's the least satisfying of the chapters to me, not because many of his arguments are not valid, but it's just grumpy to me. And he doesn't deal with the most damning aspect of the terminology in my mind, the fact that most of it was developed in the age of Cartesian dualism (certainly Rhine's view of parapsychology fits that description). So, his conclusion that parapsychology's terminology is flawed is correct, but it is one that is generally recognized by parapsychologists.

Chapter 10 is the last chapter mainly devoted to parapsychology, and Braude has another good title, A Peircing Examination of Parapsychology, a chapter that deals with the contribution of the American Pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce to parapsychology. Although Peirce's contribution is not as great as his fellow Pragmatist, William James, and although it is difficult to tease out from various comments in Peirce's work, Braude discusses the areas of mediumship and Peirce's view of fallibilism but recognizes that Peirce had not given himself over to the study of parapsychology sufficiently for Braude to say more than that Peirce had shown an approving interest in the field.

The final two chapters take us in different directions from parapsychology. Chapter 11 deals with Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) and the Structure of the Self. Braude has published a book on issues involved with MPD, and this chapter is a revised version of one of the chapters from *First Person Plural*. A problem he deals with in the book is whether MPD shows that there is an abiding, continuous self

that underlies the many alters (alternate identities) on the one hand, or the competing view that the self must be composed simply of different selves. Braude defends the first position arguing that most MPDs occur in contexts of trauma and socially specific situations, and that the person deals with those uncomfortable events using alters as an adaptive solution but remains a unified self. Expanding this view in this chapter, Braude rejects what he calls the Principle of Compositional Reversibility, which asserts that the alters we find in MPD are clues to how the Ur-self is composed, how it is originally structured. Braude argues against several forms of the CR-principle and concludes that the divisions are creative responses to trauma and socially specific situations; thus, they are productions rather than appearances of original divisions in the self.

The final chapter might be subtitled, with due respect to Monty Python, as *And Now for Something Completely Different*. And, yet, that would not be entirely accurate. Braude is a devoted jazz pianist, and in this short chapter he promotes the analogy between jazz improvisation and ordinary conversation among friends, discussing a number of similarities and in the process displaying his knowledge of the history of jazz. But the subtitle would not be completely accurate as he suggests that just as there sometimes occur telepathic events in conversation, it would not push the analogy too far to think that the same kind of events that seem telepathic and magical occur among the players in a jazz group.

It is a great help to the field that Braude has brought together these reworked and updated chapters from diverse publications, and I wholeheartedly recommend that you proudly put this book alongside his other excellent tomes.