

BOOK REVIEWS

An Introduction to the Psychology of Paranormal Belief and Experience by Tony Jinks. McFarland, 2011. 273 pp. \$35.00 (paperback). ISBN 9780786465446.

Readers of Dr. Tony Jinks's first major literary offering to the world of parapsychology might be surprised that, in his Preface, he makes two salient points that are not to be taken lightly: First, he criticizes as "facile" and witless the skeptical assumption that paranormal beliefs and experiences can simply be attributed to drunkenness, stupidity, gullibility, or emotionalism, and second, he claims that he is not an expert writing for experts. Regarding the former comment, it does justice to the book to state that Dr. Jinks is not only accusing lay persons of making these casual assumptions, but he targets professionals (e.g., clinicians) who base those same inaccurate diagnoses on mainstream psychological theory. My experience from over a decade in the field suggests that this form of "professionalism" is not only generally manifest in the aims underpinning the *psychology* of parapsychology, but I also see a new form of radical skepticism surfacing that is bent on pathologizing, in a growing number of creative ways, those who profess paranormal beliefs, or avow paranormal experiences. I believe this trend is part of a bigger movement, and is a form of defense on the part of academia, and an indictment of the competitive times in which we live. While Dr. Jinks does not quite "go there" so to speak, in terms of fully addressing the sociodynamic forces that guide academia in its trajectory, one sees the writing on the wall as one journeys through the highly eloquent and erudite (one might even say entertaining) pages of Dr. Jinks's book. And if it isn't so apparent to the reader, the quote from another Australian parapsychologist, Professor Harvey Irwin, says it all when he points out that the "implicit objective" of psychological research into paranormal belief is to demonstrate "that believers . . . are grossly deficient in intelligence, personality, education, and social standing" (p. 62). Actually, nothing could be further from the truth (for evidence, see the review by Thalbourne, 2010).

Regarding Jinks's latter point, and having read the book assiduously from cover to cover, I feel the book is sufficiently "expert" in the way it is compiled of material drawn from diverse but relevant sources. Perhaps more importantly, the book takes an approach that is hitherto sidestepped by those hailed as experts in the area of paranormal belief and experience.

In that sense, this book is crucial to the field of parapsychology for taking issue and discussing oft-ignored facts to do with the assumed validity of the various constructs that define and depict paranormal belief and experience, and the taken-for-granted methodologies (including the measures) we use (see especially Chapter 2). The book hints at a need to address these key issues, and it is suggested that there will be no true progress for the field if they continue to be ignored, no matter what breakthroughs we may make outside the areas of criticism raised in Jinks's book. These points will become clearer as the review unfolds.

After an Introduction featuring some key terms (e.g., extrasensory perception = ESP, and psychokinesis = PK), the book is then divided into two main sections—what can be explained, and what cannot be explained. Part 1 deals with the “explicable.”

In Chapter 1, various ways of testing alleged psychic abilities are introduced. Jinks alerts us to the fact that the outcomes of these tests can be variously interpreted—first, in terms of the effects per se, and second, in terms of the possible *explanation* of those effects. For example, in the first case, telepathy (mind-to-mind communication) might be clairvoyance (“seeing” the target in the mind), or vice versa. However, in the second case, the scientific psychologist might think that terminology is inconsequential, and argue that all that has been demonstrated is fraud, leaking of information (a.k.a. sensory leakage), and a variety of other likely experimental design flaws. Jinks presents evidence that undermines these assertions. He then describes some effects well-known in parapsychological circles: psi-hitting (which he calls “psi-present”), psi-missing, the decline effect, and displacement. Jinks continues to play Devil's Advocate in this Chapter by presenting the skeptic's explanations for these effects. The problems with meta-analysis are also featured.

In Chapter 2, superstition and paranormal belief are outlined and contrasted, and Jinks ties in the concept of superstition with psychological theories going back to Pavlov and Skinner. Jinks is basically arguing, from the scientific psychologists' perspective, that many of our beliefs and behaviors (which are really responses) have nonsensical associations tracing back to one unrelated stimulus or another. Many of our unusual actions and thoughts come about as part of the conditioning process—we can be like rats or pigeons that behave in certain “superstitious” ways (e.g., turning on the spot without reason *coupled with* pressing a lever to release a food pellet). Such responses emerge merely because belief and/or action (relevant, or not) helps shape behavior if desired outcomes follow. The reader begins to see where Jinks is going in Part 1—he is setting the agenda of the scientific psychologist. But the scientific psychologist misses the

import of irrational thinking—it can actually have life-preserving value, and Jinks gives examples (e.g., see p. 59). Chapter 2 is also important because it points out the problems associated with measuring paranormal belief and experience.¹ Issues to do with the *validity* of paranormal belief questions are also raised in this Chapter.

In subsequent chapters on the manner and means by which we witness the paranormal, emphasis is given to illusions, hallucinations, neurological dysfunction, and induction of hallucinatory encounters, respectively, each of which are given as major (and normal) explications of paranormal belief and experience.

Chapter 3 considers paranormal experiences as possible illusions (misinterpretations of reality). An illusion needs an external source as a starting point for the mind/brain to go to work on. Jinks looks at the psychological factors that determine illusions, and phenomena such as electronic voice phenomenon (EVP, i.e. voices from the dead heard on electronic equipment such as radios and taperecorders) are explained in terms of *perceptual set* (the way we interpret new experiences based on past experiences). Jinks also describes an experiment showing a video of an allegedly psychic demonstration (i.e. a magic trick)—non-believers (so-called “goats”) remember seeing more sleight-of-hand and trickery than psi-believers (so-called “sheep”). Of course, in a completely different experimental design, we are left wondering what goats would “see” and recall if they witnessed a genuine paranormal demonstration. Logically, they should see sleight-of-hand and trickery that was never there! Being philosophically opposed to paranormal explanations, how else could they explain what they saw? Both experiments would prove that *everyone* is susceptible to illusion. Thoughtfully, Jinks then gives examples that touch on this point (see pp. 105–106).

Chapter 4 alerts us to the nature of hallucinations, and discusses the ways in which our minds construct reality purely from inner mental experiences that have nothing to do with the environment. Hallucinations intrude into our *running world model*. Escape-from-self, dissociation, fantasy-proneness, etc., are a few of the standard explanations for paranormal experiences ranging from ESP/PK and poltergeists to UFO sightings and UFO abductions. While the psychological and medical professions might generally be satisfied with these categorical explanations, Jinks again raises some rather challenging exceptions.

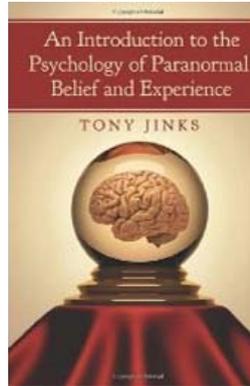
In Chapter 5, we advance to the topic of neurological dysfunction, which appeals to brain models as explanations for paranormal phenomena. The main topic in this chapter is epilepsy, which most people take to mean the grand mal type of disorder involving muscle spasms/convulsions and loss

of consciousness, but petit mal epilepsy also features, which is associated with the temporal lobe, and can even incorporate the limbic (emotional) system and cortical areas. Since the temporal lobe is a storehouse of a lifetime of experiences, the implications are profound. Any misfiring of neurons, insofar as it is in the temporal lobe, constitutes so-called temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE), which can mean images and memories are activated during TLE, but with no physical seizures. From here, it is a short step (or a giant leap) to propose that paranormal experiences are a symptom of TLE. The breadth of the experience can be characterized not only by visions, but by sounds, smells, tastes, heightened emotions, spatial distortions, floating, a sense of presence, and some physiological symptoms (e.g., changes in heart rate, respiration, and blood flow). For the experient it is all very real, but the observer would detect very little, if anything. This chapter is not only informative; it puts up a strong case toward understanding the nature of many *subjective* paranormal experiences, but I stress the word *subjective* in that neurological theories give us no explanation about the processes involved in objectively observable and demonstrated ESP and PK events. Even if we confine ourselves to *subjective* paranormal experiences, there is still the assumption that the seizures explain them, which only begs the question: What causes the seizures? This issue is taken up in Part 2.

In Chapter 6, Jinks investigates some of the hypothesized external sources of hallucinatory encounters, and these include magnetic, electromagnetic, and geomagnetic sources (e.g., our earth's core, our sun, the Milky Way Galaxy), and local earth energies that result from tectonic strain. These fields and forces affect our brains, particularly those areas (i.e. the temporal lobe) that produce subjective paranormal experiences. This is an intriguing chapter, but Chapter 7, which brings Part 1 to a close, is a more general and considered discussion and critique of such paranormal theories that appeal to tectonic strain, transcranial stimulation, and electromagnetism. These constructs are too complex and time-consuming to delve into here, and readers are encouraged to explore this area at their own leisure. However, it should be noted that mainstream commentators within the various professions (i.e. psychology, psychiatry, etc.) also dispute these and other explanations, though they usually do not drop the psychopathological causation that is often associated with claims of alleged paranormal experience. Nevertheless, the psychological theories set out in these sundry chapters appear to be viable in certain circumstances, and of course Jinks presents so much evidence that conventional psychological science may well be well-grounded in its claims when it comes to matters to do with paranormal experience and their causes (see Chapter 1).

Then we come to Part 2, which is not an attempt to explain the

mechanisms of paranormal experiences, but rather the *purposes* they serve. To do that, Jinks launches into the psychodynamic theories of Sigmund Freud, D. Scott Rogo, C. G. Jung, and others, and the reader will see that the purposes served have much to do with the psyche's attempt to heal itself by making conscious those events that are unconsciously causing deep mental discomfort. So, telepathy, ghosts, and UFO abductions are not real (at least, not necessarily), but are manifestations of the creative, dynamic unconscious working in symbolic mode, disguising deep moral dilemmas or traumas in a form more acceptable to the denying, repressive, sensitive, or neurotic ego. Breakthroughs and ultimate healing comes with revelation and recognition.



The various psychodynamic theories tend to be variations on each other, and one begins to see that the inexplicability of psi might not be so important for those who benefit and believe in it. But the scientist with a different set of questions is really forced to return to Part 1 and try to find answers there (Dr. Jinks says as much on p. 181). Perhaps those scientists should take a page from Part 2, for Jinks shows that even mainstream conventional science is riddled with complexity that not only defies common sense but also bamboozles the clear-cut processes of rational thought. These ideas are not the machinations of Dr. Jinks—major players in science feel the same way. For example, the physicist Richard Feynman stated “I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics” (see p. 222). How are such statements supposed to win the hearts and minds of the lay public? How can we have a Physics (or topics in that field) that no one understands? Indeed, how can hard-line scientists dare to impress (force?) upon society ideas, notions, and even findings that bear the very hallmarks of magic and superstition leveled at, and usually confined to, the subject matter of parapsychologists? Perhaps all we need do is appeal to the notion of replicable evidence. Is demonstrable evidence that may or may not elicit strong effects more convincing than inconsistent evidence that produces only weak effects? Apparently not (readers should refer back to Chapters 6 and 7 to see that proponents of many explicatory theories are not dissuaded by lack of replication, or an incapacity of those theories to explain all the symptoms or facets of a paranormal encounter).

So, must we learn to live with only a partial knowledge and understanding of many phenomena that come under the scrutinous eye of scientists, simply because the universe is stranger than we can ever think

it is, or imagine it to be? It seems that the deeper we look, the more we investigate, the more unfathomable becomes the world of our experience. To help ground these speculative notions, Jinks's Chapter 10 (titled Transpersonal Psychology), which closes the book, offers some connecting thoughts on how parapsychology (and the psychology of parapsychology) is expanded as our understanding of Self expands.

In closing, one finds that a great deal of ufological and cryptozoological material is used by Dr. Jinks to illustrate the nature and manifestations of the underlying phenomenologies and the psychopathologies thereof. In part the reason for this is that most of the theories explaining paranormal phenomena are illustrated best using this material. One feels, though, that the author also has a penchant for using such cultural artifacts and motifs, but the subsequent limited treatment, in a similar way, of conventional parapsychological material (i.e. pure ESP and PK) indicates a lost opportunity to demonstrate both the relevance and inadequacy of the various claims made by the clinical/scientific professionals (notwithstanding the fact that Jinks does not completely overlook those topics). On the one hand, this limitation of the text might irk aficionados of parapsychology who regard and define their field as being *only* the study of ESP, PK, and life after death. On the other hand, it may be the case that the field has been rather restricted in its scope for too long, so that more focus on ufology and cryptozoology might be a welcome relief to a somewhat dry field driven by statistical findings and overly imaginative theoretical exploits.

Dr. Jinks's book is, nevertheless, an excellent in-depth introduction to the general topic of parapsychology, and goes beyond being a mere introduction to the twofold topic indicated in its title. More than that, it would stand up as a highly suitable introductory textbook for psychology and parapsychology students, even rivaling many such texts currently available. One reason being that it illustrates how complex the paranormal really is, but the main reason being that it takes an approach that weighs up both sides of the argument rather than endorses the practices of academic institutions that are only interested in furthering and perpetuating their rigid skeptical aims. I raised this concern at the start of my review. At the end of the day, I believe the problem hardnosed skeptics have with paranormal belief and experience per se (specifically referring to academic skeptics, not just lay skeptics) primarily stems from the goal of clinicians to normalize society, and it can only do this by first finding a problem. It does not require a careful reading between the lines of Jinks's book before one can see these issues rising to the surface—apart from Irwin's comment above, the issues are in fact embedded key topics of the book (for examples, I refer the reader to pp. 62–65, 73–78, 114–116, etc.).

Jinks is, however, careful not to drift from one of his more pragmatic aims of influencing parapsychology for the better—he usually (and diplomatically) couches his criticisms in methodological terms rather than outrightly expressing his disapprobation of conventional psychology *and* parapsychology. As things are, these fields could be seen as often deviating from their primary goal of furthering science for the sake of knowing and understanding more completely the nature of human beings (indeed, our very universe) irrespective of who or what those pursuits upset. That single enlightening fact, albeit controversial (if not divisive), is enough to convince this reviewer that this is a book well worth having on one's bookshelf.

Note

¹ This topic formed the basis of a lecture given by Tony Jinks at the 3rd Annual AIPR Lecture in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, in November 2011.

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Reference

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