

## EDITORIAL

It's not often that I get to feel like a spokesperson for empirical conservatism. But that happened recently when I was invited to give a talk at the 50th Annual Conference on Anomalous Phenomena sponsored by the International Fortean Organization (INFO). The occasion provided several healthy illustrations about what I suppose we can call boggle relativity. The conference was stimulating, challenging, and professionally run, and I was happy to meet quite a few very smart and pleasant attendees—among them, the SSE's treasurer John Reed, MD. In fact, I very much look forward to attending future INFO conferences.

But one thing that struck me especially was the difference I frequently noticed between the phenomena I was (more or less) comfortable incorporating into my worldview and the phenomena others there were equally prepared to accept. Often enough, that difference felt to me like a gaping chasm. For example, I was chatting with one clearly bright and well-read man about the evidence for remote viewing. Initially, we seemed to be very much on the same page. We apparently agreed on what the evidence was, we agreed that the phenomenon was genuine, and initially at least I thought we also agreed on the implications of the data and what they suggested about the place of human beings in nature. But then, in what struck me as a dazzling and swift series of unfounded assumptions and apparently unjustified inferential leaps, my interlocutor started asserting—with the same degree of assurance he'd lavished on the experimental evidence for remote viewing—that remote viewers were having out-of-body experiences in which they traveled to distant parts of the universe and communicated with rocks and other apparently inert objects. And he interpreted OBEs literally, insisting that OBE-ers were in fact leaving their bodies—rather than, say, having imagery-rich clairvoyant episodes while remaining thoroughly embodied.

Perhaps some *JSE* readers will be more sympathetic to these claims than I was. Nevertheless, they were moves I was not ready to make. Still, I had to be careful not to fall instinctively into the sort of knee-jerk skepticism I frequently encounter and about which I've often complained in print. I had to remember that at one time I was equally ready to dismiss—no doubt with a disdainful flourish—any sympathetic claim regarding the evidence of parapsychology. I also had to recall that, even after coming to terms philosophically with the experimental evidence in parapsychology, I was still contemptuous of the non-experimental evidence—that is, until I studied that evidence carefully and eventually documented my conceptual evolution (Braude, 1997). In fact, I couldn't help but remember that, much more recently, I had to re-evaluate my dismissive attitude toward astrology in the face of my wife's astonishing virtuosity (see Braude, 2007: chap. 8).

Don't get me wrong. I still *have* my dismissive attitude toward what I considered to be the extreme positions of my interlocutor. Whether I like it or not,

that attitude is a fact about my current intellectual and emotional life, and I can't simply make it disappear with a cunning and quick bit of ratiocination. So for now at any rate, I'd be surprised (to say the least) if I later came to believe that we can communicate with alien (or terrestrial) sticks and stones. But I felt and continue to feel that it would have been inappropriate and unwarranted for me to have expressed my attitude and to have attached any great importance to it. I felt that if I'd done that, I'd have been every bit as contemptible as the glib and condescending skeptics whose attacks on parapsychology I've often tried to expose. After all, I couldn't pretend that my skepticism was rooted in a command of the relevant material. In fact, I hadn't even read the works to which my interlocutor was referring. So although I realized I wasn't a total ignoramus about the topics under discussion and was arguably entitled to at least some degree of skepticism, I knew also that I probably hadn't identified and thought through all the relevant issues. As far as I knew at that moment, my dismissive attitude was grounded mostly in my smugness about what I thought I knew. I also knew that if the history of science has taught us anything, it's shown that humankind is a very poor judge of the empirically possible. So the only thing I felt I could honestly and appropriately do at the time was to confess both my doubts and my ignorance, and not pretend that my judgments on the matter were delivered from a privileged post atop Mt. Olympus.

What continues to disturb me, though, is how easily I lapsed into a kind of superciliousness I've worked hard to combat both in myself and others. Maybe it's one of those demons in life that can never be fully vanquished and which will forever require a certain amount of vigilance. So it occurs to me that perhaps the time is right to remind *JSE* readers and others working in the area of anomalistics or frontier science of the need for humility and collegiality.

The *JSE* exists for the purpose of examining carefully empirical and theoretical claims about which many people, including regular readers of the *Journal*, have very strong opinions, both pro and con. The community of *JSE* subscribers is hardly uniform. It's a collection of individuals from different educational and scientific backgrounds, with different interests and assumptions, and of course with different boggle thresholds. I know that some readers of the *Journal* discount the interests of others, and I consider that state of affairs unfortunate. I'd like to think that *JSE* authors and readers have all been somewhat chastened about reacting quickly and negatively to empirical claims that strike them as beyond the pale. I would imagine that most of them have been stung at some time by others' negative and seemingly ignorant or hasty reactions to their own beliefs, and probably many have experienced changes in their own boggle thresholds similar to those I've mentioned from my own life.

I share the view of C. S. Peirce that of all earthly creatures we seem to have a distinctive knack for understanding the world around us. But that knack is merely what allows us to make scientific and intellectual progress and to frame increasingly successful theoretical frameworks. However, our faculty of understanding at no time provides a guarantee that we're making steady and unimpeded scientific

progress and have managed to avoid getting off track—much less that we've arrived at a kind of timeless truth beyond mere warranted assertibility.

So when I now reflect back on the INFO conference, what stands out for me is how refreshingly tolerant and warm the participants were. I know that open-mindedness comes in degrees and that it shades gradually and eventually imperceptibly into credulity. But that's no different from the way cognitive caution or skepticism shades into intellectual rigidity and close-mindedness. Despite the differences between my beliefs or theoretical orientation and those of some other conference attendees, in important ways I felt I was among kindred spirits. What I particularly admired about those I met was their respect for data, their recognition that data are always subject to varying interpretations, and their willingness to question not only received opinions but their own opinions as well.

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Alert readers will have noticed some changes in *JSE*'s stable of Associate Editors. York Dobyns has returned to his previous *JSE* role as trusty manuscript reviewer. So although York no longer needs to shoulder the responsibilities of Associate Editor, he's hardly off the hook as far as editorial assignments are concerned (demonstrating once again that no good deed goes unpunished). In any case, I extend to him my warmest and sincerest thanks for his years of conscientious and dedicated service in his former role. In the meantime, my former post as Associate Editor will now be filled by another philosopher, Michael Sudduth, who coincidentally makes his debut in this issue—and in my opinion, a very impressive one at that—as *JSE* author. I'm also pleased to announce two more distinguished additions to my team of Associate Editors, the noted psychologists Daryl Bem and Etzel Cardeña. Both are current members of the Parapsychological Association Board of Directors (Etzel is PA President). Daryl's sophisticated and comprehensive grasp of the evidence for psi phenomena will clearly be a valuable asset in his role as Associate Editor. And Etzel's expertise not only in parapsychology, but in dissociation and hypnosis, will be crucial as the *JSE* expands its coverage of anomalies of consciousness.

And since I neglected to point this out in my debut editorial last issue, let me emphasize how fortunate I am to have the loyal and scrupulous assistance of my entire team of Associate Editors. I rely heavily on their expertise in areas of research outside of my own, and I count on their experience and wisdom in evaluating submissions to the *Journal* and in maintaining the *JSE*'s scholarly integrity. There is absolutely no way I could do my job without their help. Similarly, I'm indebted to the *Journal*'s diligent and tenacious book review editor, David Moncrief, who somehow manages to keep abreast of things worth reviewing, while at the same time procuring review copies from (often inscrutably unresponsive) publishers and managing to extract thoughtful reviews from typically overworked volunteers.

**References**

- Braude, S. E. (1997). *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Braude, S. E. (2007). *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations*. Chicago: University of Chicago.