

REVIEW:

Robert McLuhan's book, *Randi's Prize: What Sceptics Say about the Paranormal, Why They Are Wrong and Why It Matters*.

James 'The Amazing' Randi is a stage magician who says he has a million dollars for anyone who can convince him they have psychic powers. No one has even come close to winning, proof, say sceptical scientists, that there is no such thing as 'the paranormal'. But are they right? In this illuminating and often provocative analysis, Robert McLuhan examines the influence of Randi and other debunking sceptics in shaping scientific opinion about such things as telepathy, psychics, ghosts and near-death experiences. He points out that scientific researchers who investigate these things at first hand overwhelmingly consider them to be genuinely anomalous. But this has shocking implications, for science, for society and for even perhaps for ourselves as individuals. From Amazon.

I would like to get something like this in that amazon description: Magician and illusionist James Randi offered a huge prize to anybody who could show they had psychic power. Nobody got that prize for no psychic can produce phenomena when the controls are watertight. Any lifting of rules at all leads to results which tells us everything.

Those who say there is evidence for psychic ability all agree or should agree that telepathy is the minimum you need to explain it. The book takes that line.

If so that then accounts for why mediums have some bizarre spirit guides and other visitors such as Leonora Piper's Doctor Phinuit. The good Doctor is just a creation which the brain uses to receive and give telepathic information.

It is felt to explain why psychics clearly do statistically get a lot of stuff right that they simply should not get right considering the rest of what they reveal is garbage. If so then mistakes and errors do not prove that there is nothing there. They prove that it cannot be summoned at will or relied on.

The book says there have been cases where mediums give loads of false information but inexplicably give some accurate bits such as when they all agree on what somebody's first initial is.

All of that prevents the psychic and paranormal being considered a science in any sense.

Parapsychology cannot replicate results and nobody claims to be able to do it. You cannot test people and their responses the way you can test chemicals etc. As there is no repeatability, there is no way the parapsychologist can say, "We have discovered x. So we can build on that discovery."

Science cannot function without maths and statistics. Psi tries to contradict statistics and make you doubt them. The paranormal as a concept definitely undermines science and has no right to use it to make itself look good.

Some have observed that most psychic and telepathy reports seem to be about avoiding some danger. They look like warnings. This could be evidence that religious revelation which is about preaching and doctrine is not revelation in any sense. It is not paranormal and is man-made fantasy. The paranormal does not waste much energy on that kind of stuff. The paranormality then of the resurrection of Jesus is suspect in a way his prediction of destruction for Jerusalem is not.

Belief in psychic powers would be a nightmare for a state worried about its security. It would be forced to spend money that should go on hospitals testing a psychic in case that person is sending messages telepathically to the rest of the world. The implied irresponsibility and potentially worse irresponsibility of psychics and their sheep is a disgrace.

Some investigators try to strike a balance between those who say all paranormal occurrences can be explained naturally and those who think there are times when something out of this world is happening. If they really think that then why are there never any real efforts barring one or two to debunk the debunkers? To do that you need to take a good case and look at the evidence and see if the debunkers may have misunderstood it. The debunking always amounts to giving opinions on the subject. But we need more than that for such a serious subject. Why are debunkers not in court all the time for they find evidence of fraud and unprofessionalism constantly? Why are the accused not taking civil cases against them?

Magical thinking is common even in secularists as with everybody else. We think, Luhan says, that basketball players who score once or twice are more likely to score again on the next shot which is simply false. "Psychologists also point to the human tendency to find significant connections between events, even where none exists. A craving for meaning leads us always to look for patterns and inclines us towards 'magical thinking'; we see the hand of God or Fate in what are actually

random events that just happen to group together in apparently significant ways."

He recommends the 1981 book by James Alcock - Parapsychology: Science or Magic?

He shows that one cause of magical thinking is how something can happen and if a number of people see it their reports of what happened will change and become less accurate. Memory corruption and reconstruction sets in.

I would suggest that the thinking may be magical for some but surely it looks more like a mistake than anything else? It is an understandable mistake. One clear example of magical thinking is how you blame the television for breaking down.

There are better examples of magical thinking. One instance of magical thinking opens the door to more instances. Mistakes build on mistakes. It is good that he shows there is enough of tacit superstition about to fuel religion and superstition.

The author feels that dreams or waking hallucination of a friend or relative usually in trouble are signs of psychic ability and too different from a normal dream to be just classed as an ordinary event. How does he know? Dreams are very personal to each dreamer.

This contradicts his accurate portrayal of how memory is easily coloured and corrupted. We do speak of what are clearly dreams as being of great accuracy and vividness though in fact they may have been neither.

He points out that visions at night-time tend to be surrounded by light and are so convincing that the witness will search for a secret door. Other things are that the vision may be of the person in a better physical condition perhaps at their prime of life or they might look ill and distressed. Communication may amount to no more than the voice of intuition saying something to you inside.

This could explain the resurrection appearances. You would wonder if the mind or memory creates the light in order to explain how you see in the dark.

He writes, "many reported apparitions occur during the day when the percipient is fully awake and the conditions for hypnagogia are not obviously present. Also, apparitions are often seen in isolation and they are fairly stable and can last for several seconds, none of which is characteristic of hypnagogia which tends to be a sweep of jumbled images flowing rapidly in front of one's vision." Then he contradicts this by saying that a vision cannot be hypnagogia when it coincides with the death of the person in the vision or seen by more than one person at the same time!

He criticises the view that cases of psychics cheating which have been proven necessarily prove that everybody is cheating all the time. The logic is a thief does not steal all the time.

But the difference is you can test within reason how much a thief steals. A psychic cannot be tested and can lie all the time and still get hits through luck or manipulation. You don't know if they are using their powers to lie to you or really have powers. There is no reality check which is why the default is to assume a psychic is always a fraud or deluded.

He speaks of cases where one person sees something and sees a vision where somebody who is calmer and more down to earth will see a play of light and deny anything special happened. His criteria for a vision being possibly real is based around how unambiguous the vision is. But there is unambiguous in every vision. What do I mean? If you see a rambling mad vision it is real to you and that is not ambiguous. It is about the vision not the content.

Incredibly he builds on the fact that memories degrade and corrupt and change over very little time to build a case for the paranormal! He reasons that you can experience something paranormal and your brain will start altering the memory subtly so that it will "conform to daily norms." The mind it is true can smooth over any memories to make them fit "commonsense" prejudices and other things.

This is an admission that if memory is that powerful then it makes sense to put psychic testimonies down to memory mistakes instead of saying that people with strange but explainable experiences are in fact suffering from some anti-supernatural bias.

He says that near death experiences are "explained" by sceptics and being down to anesthetics and medication but people who nearly drown for example report them too. He says the clarity and unambiguous nature of the experience does not match the loss of consciousness, anoxia, that is held to cause the experiences. It is like saying being grossly intoxicated can improve your ability at complex physics calculations. Plus there are people who suffer loss of oxygen and then on some other occasion a near death experience who say there is nothing comparable about either experience.

Now if you decide to talk about a near-death experience you have to talk about it in a certain way so as not to look stupid. You will have to add in elements to make it look more meaningful and spiritual and inspiring.

I would answer that some cases being explained by natural causes hints that there is an explanation from nature for the others though we do not know what it is.

He says that Susan Blackmore a sceptic about near death experiences is wrong to blame anaesthetics for it. She says the person knocked out is often more conscious than you think. But the evidence is that they rarely are and this does not explain near death experiences for they are too common to be explained that way. It may explain a few but what about the rest?

The answer is that near death experiences are not that common and many of the reporters of the experience are lying or carried away by imagination.

Those who have the experience generally talk about being surrounded by complete love and joy and may call it ecstatic bliss.

If we all have sin, and many religions say we do, the idea of this heavenly bliss when you are a sinner and have no sin cleansing purgatory to go through is clearly a deception or illusion.

He points out that those who have near death experiences say they learn in them how their actions bad and good impacted on others. He says the experience is "a mega-powerful attack of conscience." You see yourself as others who you have willingly or unwillingly hurt have seen you.

This has to be an illusion for nobody can really experience all that depth in a short time. This is the principle reason for assuming NDEs are not real.

Anyway all that leads him to surmise that all thoughts and ideas do not come from the brain and many come from something that transcends the brain. He dismisses how mediums have flamboyant spirits with odd names but says this does not prove it is always playacting.

It certainly proves that the post man or post woman, the guide is unreliable and is only reliable when it is up to something. Its reliability is nothing to crow about.

He speaks of automatic writing where the person holding the pen seems to be the channel for a force that writes complex and coherent works that the holder may not be capable of producing. Needless to say he gives no examples of this.

He says that channellers bring out a lot of didactic material. This is information that is meant to help you be a wiser and better person.

Christian noting that the Bible condemns such activities will hold that this is part of evil spirits or powers coming from them are trying to disguise themselves as good. Demons and such powers may be good by accident.

The assertion that no psychic with real powers has went to claim Randi's prize is that they should not put themselves in the hands of somebody who won't believe and who demonises them. He goes as far as to say that Randi the magician should not be debunking psychics for that is a job for science!

Rubbish - showing how psychic feats are or may be done is part of science.

He admits that sceptical investigators of the paranormal "can point to the failure of any medium to gain unequivocal proof of survival proof of a kind that might put the matter beyond doubt." He says that the failure of mediums to give us the codes left by people who said they would try to give them through a medium should they die needs explanation. It is good to have that admission and it shows that belief in the paranormal is not based on solid evidence.

Interestingly he mentions Louisa Rhine who thought that people can fool themselves with real psychic powers. She sees astral projection and out of body experiences as you using your psychic power to fool yourself. He agrees with this possibility. She suggests that much poltergeist activity is in fact only in your head - your mind makes you see the item as moving by itself. It is your perception that is moved by the poltergeist not the object.

He mentions Julian Baggini who says that if something survives death or if life survives death then the something or life may something but not the person. Leaving the body behind would mean its a very unhuman life from now on. Self is about your personality and how it is formed by your thoughts and memories and this is destroyed by Alzheimer's or a brain injury. "Logically, then, it makes sense to suppose that the demise of the brain extinguishes the personality altogether."

One would think all that settles the question. There is no life after death. Like a man who argues that the killer did not use the club in his hand but some other weapon that has not been found, he keeps trying to ignore the fact that the matter is

settled.

He says that a person seeming to be out of the body or having a vision seems to mean survival or living beyond the grave is possible and of these experiences he asks, "If they don't mean what they seem to mean, then what do they mean?"

The seem differs from person to person. Living people thinking they have temporarily wafted out like ghosts from their bodies does not prove life after death simply because they are not dead.

He cites mediums being able to replicate the subjects mannerisms and jokes. That is a very subjective test and it is proven that people have imagined that fake mediums were able to do it. Its wishful thinking.

He seems to agree that there is a lot less psychic communication and paranormal activity than we would be led to believe so there is still a role for sceptics. Many sceptics do in fact believe in some events - many are united by thinking Lenora Piper was a real medium for something that presented itself as the souls of the dead.

He points out how Muslim and Christian sources never detail the afterlife. Spiritualism however has a lot to say about it and what it is like and what to expect.

It is obvious that despite Islam and Christianity being obtuse and vague on the subject, that some are still willing to die for this Heaven. Religion is dangerous when people would throw away their own lives (martyrs) or that of others (jihadists) for a reward they know nothing about. It shows the toxic power of faith in the afterlife.

People are willing to be fooled by mediums with stories of a complicated and earth style afterlife and part with their hard earned money. The children go hungry for the parent wants to pay for the medium!

He suggests that as spirits could live on after the body dies but all the while fading away gradually out of existence. But upon thinking about it he decides to diverge from Professor Rhine who said that psi exists but is evidence that you do not survive death. He said psi reinforces the possibility of life after death.

If such power exists, nobody says that even if it does that it should always be listened to or treated as accurate. Like hearing, wrong information may be picked up. Thus if psi exists it neither shows or disproves life after death. If more people realised that there would be little interest in the subject.

Spirits often in visions do fade before the witness. We must ask if that is the final death? Maybe the body dies and the spirit dies later on? He says we seem to live on and that is how it looks but does it? Not when there are ghost stories of a person seemingly dying as a spirit. Spirits seem to stop talking and communicating in time that after you die you remain alive in some form but it does not last and you keep dissolving. If so then denying life after death but being wrong about it is no big deal!

He says he admires those who bravely face death while seeing it as complete annihilation and permanent non-existence. He should say the person is willing to go for dying leaves room for others to live. That shows the heroism of the position.

In the notes he mentions a 1999 study analysing critical thinking ability between believers in the paranormal and those who did not believe. No difference was found.

Here are the sources.

Critical thinking and belief in the paranormal: A re-evaluation (British Journal of Psychology). Chris A. Roe "This paper evaluates the claim that believers in the paranormal exhibit poor critical thinking ability relative to disbelievers, as manifested in their inability to evaluate the competence of experimental abstracts. It is argued that such differences reported elsewhere (Alcock & Otis, 1980; Gray & Mill, 1990) may be accountable for in terms of the action of cognitive dissonance, or as due to experimental artifacts. A study was conducted which attempted to overcome earlier methodological shortcomings, and which assessed the cognitive dissonance account of differential performance. Altogether, 117 participants were characterized as believers, neutrals or disbelievers according to a pre-measure. Subsequently, each participant was asked to evaluate an abbreviated experimental report which was either sympathetic or unsympathetic to parapsychology. No differences in assessment ratings were found, failing to replicate the claimed effect and supporting an account in terms of artifact. There was a significant tendency for those participants who received a paper which was incongruent with their a priori beliefs to rate it as less competently conducted and analysed than those who rated the congruent paper, in keeping with the cognitive dissonance account."

And there is, Perceived Accuracy of Fortune Telling and Belief in the Paranormal, Matthew Hughes, Robert Behanna, Margaret L. Signorella

In the U.S. and similar countries, beliefs in the supernatural have remained stable or increased over the past decades. Psychology students rated their beliefs in a variety of paranormal topics. Students were randomly assigned to receive either a true fortune (i.e., using "real" fortune tellers' procedures) or a false one (produced by interchanging the meanings traditionally associated with the suits). Belief in those items most similar to psychic reading—fortune telling, astrology, and clairvoyance—were significantly associated with higher perceived accuracy of the fortune. The present results suggest that predicting an individual's susceptibility to an ostensibly paranormal event would require knowledge of the person's specific beliefs about the event, rather than general paranormal beliefs.

Back to our author.

He writes that there are NDEs that do not fit the standard perception of what such an experience involves.

AJ Ayer the humanist philosopher reported a near death experience where he saw what seemed to be the River Styx and described being pulled towards a pain inflicting red light and met the so called ministers of the universe.

Here is Ayer's account.

I was confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful even when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe. Among its ministers were two creatures who had been put in charge of space. These ministers periodically inspected space and had recently carried out such an inspection. They had, however, failed to do their work properly, with the result that space, like a badly fitting jigsaw puzzle, was slightly out of joint. A further consequence was that the laws of nature had ceased to function as they should. I felt that it was up to me to put things right. I also had the motive of finding a way to extinguish the painful light. I assumed that it was signaling that space was awry and that it would switch itself off when order was restored. Unfortunately, I had no idea where the guardians of space had gone and feared that even if I found them I should not be able to communicate with them. It then occurred to me that whereas, until the present century, physicists accepted the Newtonian severance of space and time, it had become customary, since the vindication of Einstein's general theory of relativity, to treat space-time as a single whole. Accordingly, I thought that I could cure space by operating upon time. I was vaguely aware that the ministers who had been given charge of time were in my neighborhood and I proceeded to hail them. I was again frustrated. Either they did not hear me, or they chose to ignore me, or they did not understand me. I then hit upon the expedient of walking up and down, waving my watch, in the hope of drawing their attention not to my watch itself but to the time which it measured. This elicited no response. I became more and more desperate, until the experience suddenly came to an end.

This is one of the few accounts that show the beings that govern time and the afterlife cannot be likeable or good. No wonder he concluded, " My recent experiences have slightly weakened my conviction that my genuine death, which is due fairly soon, will be the end of me, though I continue to hope that it will be. They have not weakened my conviction that there is no god. "

Fay Weldon found a snobby Heaven that she despised when she had her NDE.

The accusation of fraud against some sceptical investigators is interesting. Some have tried to manipulate debunkings simply because they are desperate for any explanation that seems to fit. But then somebody has come along with the correct way to refute the claims.

The good thing about Randi's Prize is that it does not try to bait you with some kind of gospel, some kind of salvation prize. The logic is very flawed in critical parts. The claim that James Randi's system did not give real psychics a chance is just a lie. What you do is you take cases and examine them minutely to see if Randi was dismissing psychics. Its simple - if he was accusing of trickery when that was ruled out by the tight straightjacket then that should be clear.