

Scientific Facts and Fictions: On the Trail Of Paranormal Beliefs at CSICOP '84

CSICOP's 1984 conference at Stanford University, "Paranormal Beliefs: Scientific Facts and Fictions," was originally intended to be smaller than the first conference the year before in Buffalo. It wasn't to be.

To no one's displeasure, almost 600 registrants attended, and the result was the unexpected richness of personal interactions that turn a conference into far more than just a scientific meeting. The meeting and eating halls were packed, and if crowds sometimes kept an attendee from getting to a colleague across the way, more than likely he (or she) would quickly bump into someone he knew only by letter, voice, or name. Thus are new contacts made, ideas exchanged, friendships and alliances forged.

Officially, it all got underway with a reception and banquet Friday evening, November 9, at the garden-style Hyatt Rikeys Hotel in Palo Alto. CSICOP chairman Paul Kurtz launched the proceedings with a review of the history of the Committee, the essential role of skepticism in science and education, and the abundant deficiencies of news media reporting on the paranormal. The eminent philosopher and CSICOP Fellow Sidney Hook followed with a scholarly keynote address on reason, science, and myth. The evening also featured the presentation of CSICOP's 1984 "In Praise of Reason" award to Professor Hook and citations to two journalists whose work exemplifies perceptive critical reporting on the paranormal (see accompanying story).

Saturday morning, amid the sweet smell of rain-moistened eucalyptus, the buses whisked everyone off to the Kresge Auditorium on the Stanford

campus. There the session on "Space-Age Paranormal Claims" got off to a rousing start with a spirited skewering of astrology and a beautiful evocation of the awesome real wonders of the universe by astronomer Andrew Fraknoi, who almost had the audience on their feet when he finished.

Another highlight was a rare—perhaps unprecedented—joint appearance of UFO proponent J. Allen Hynek and archcritic Philip J. Klass. Those who expected fireworks may have been disappointed. Hynek professed to be a skeptic and gave a dry, statistical paper that was remarkable mainly for the degree to which he apparently takes the multitudinous eyewitness reports of UFO sightings if not at face value nevertheless as a manifestation of some deep scientific mystery. Klass, temporally separated from Hynek by a critical talk on ancient-astronaut claims by Colorado State University astronomer Roger Culver, ended his paper on the UFO nonphenomenon by challenging Hynek, not to a duel, but to put his



Sidney Hook: Reason, science, and myth.

Andrew Skolnick



Gary P. Posner

More than 500 persons attended CSICOP sessions at Stanford.

best cases to the judgment of the National Academy of Sciences. Hynek didn't go for the idea.

After a California salad-bar lunch, attendees returned to take up the matter of the alleged "Psychic Arms Race." No topic on the agenda had as much worldwide media (and supposedly governmental) attention during the past year.

This panel included writer Martin Ebon, who good-naturedly prefaced his talk: "I come to you as a token parapsychologist, and you should be nice to me." (Actually several other parapsychologists, including Russell Targ, coauthor of *The Mind Race*, had been invited to take part in this panel; all declined.) Ebon, author of *The Psychic Arms Race: Fact or Fiction?* gave it all away at the beginning when he looked up from his prepared paper and said, "Incidentally, there is no psychic arms race. Don't worry about it!" (He did go on to provide many interesting insights into parapsychology in the Soviet Union.)

The other panelists agreed. Ray Hyman did not speak on his critical

analysis (*SI*, Winter 1984-85) of Targ's book, which helped promote the idea of a psychic arms race. He offered instead a number of general principles that demonstrate why *any* claims for evidence of psi should be treated with scientific caution. Examples: "The Problem of the Shifting Data Base" (as soon as critics shoot down the most recent experiment claimed to validate psi, parapsychologists drop that one and come up with a new candidate). "To Be Forewarned Is to Be *Disarmed*" (the false and misleading comfort that if one knows about the methods of trickery and self-deception, one is immune to them). "The Patchwork Quilt Fallacy" (defining psi by whatever you find; if you notice a decline effect, that becomes part of your data). All parapsychology experiments so far are seriously lacking in scientific persuasiveness, he concluded.

Philip Klass returned to the podium with a solid paper based on his experience as a longtime Washington reporter for *Aviation Week* (sometimes known as "Aviation Leak," for its frequent stories on innermost Pentagon

secrets). "In my more than three decades as a technical journalist," said Klass, "I have never heard a single leak indicating any official Pentagon interest in psychic weapons or warfare, nor has any member of our staff, to my knowledge." He reported on a conversation he had recently with Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham, former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Graham said a *New York Times* article stating Graham "acknowledged that the military had spent considerable sums on psychic research" had been off base. Klass said Graham told him he had been badly misquoted. Graham had told the *Times* reporter that he himself had "no knowledge" of any Pentagon funding of psychic research.

The final, evening session, "Psychic Claims," was led off by physician Wallace Sampson's thorough critical evaluation of claims that meditation can cure cancer. Sampson wrapped it up this way: "One can only conclude that commercializing and franchising this method is not in the public interest. It is in all likelihood a soft-core type of quackery, and suffers from the usual type of pseudoscientific thinking."

Then came two dramatic presentations (although neither featured even one magic trick) by magicians Robert Steiner and James Randi. Steiner's was on his experience in Australia playing the role of a famous (but fictitious)



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Hyman: The patchwork quilt fallacy.

American psychic, "Steve Terbot." The Australian Skeptics (and some sympathetic members of the Australian media) helped carry off the hoax, in which Terbot garnered enormous national publicity for his paranormal abilities only to reveal his true nonpsychic identity on a live national television show. Mark Plummer, chairman of the Australian Skeptics, spoke briefly to the Stanford audience about the positive effects the hoax had in showing Australians fascinated with the paranormal how easily they could be deceived.

Astronomer Steven Shore of the Space Telescope Science Institute preceded Randi's presentation on the Columbus poltergeist case with a short summary of his own experiences investigating the incident with Randi in Columbus. He and colleague Nick Sanduleak of Case Western Reserve University concluded, as did Randi, that the whole thing was a hoax and that the media, eager for an exciting story, had been gulled into swallowing the deceptions of the Resch daughter. Randi followed with a rapid-fire multimedia presentation. It featured a slide show of a dozen photographs taken but never published by the *Columbus Dispatch* (which has denied the SKEPTICAL



Hynek and Klass: Antagonists momentarily bury their differences at opening reception.

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Andrew Skolnick

Ebon: No psychic arms race.



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Randi: Flying phones phoniness.

INQUIRER permission to reproduce them), several of which show clear deception on Tina Resch's part. It also included a television station videotape that caught her intentionally reaching up and pulling over a lamp, then springing away in mock surprise. (Randi's two-part report on this case begins in this issue of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.)

Parapsychologist William Roll, target of some criticism by Randi and Shore for his role and his propoltergeist comments in the Tina Resch case, followed on the program. But he averted any confrontation on the subject by delivering a prepared paper on some amusing incidents of psychic deception he had encountered in South American countries.

Stanford statistician Persi Diaconis concluded with a discussion of pitfalls that lead people to misunderstand the probability of dramatic coincidences and therefore to misattribute paranormal significance to them.

Although the conference was sponsored by CSICOP and the Stanford Department of Psychology (represented at the meeting by Lee Ross), the work of the Bay Area Skeptics was indispensable in implementing all the necessary arrangements. Its many able members

and volunteers, working with the CSICOP Buffalo-based staff, helped make the conference both an intellectual and logistical success.

The most frequently asked question as the conference wound to a close was, "Where is the next one going to be held?" Although there have now been only two, these CSICOP conferences seem to be increasingly popular and important to those who attend. The next morning, the CSICOP Executive Council voted to accept an invitation



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Steiner: Going "psychic" Down Under.

from the Colorado Organization for a Rational Alternative to Pseudoscience (CO-RAP) to hold a CSICOP conference at the University of Colorado, Boulder in April 1986.

CSICOP is now making plans for a conference at the University College in London on June 28 and 29, 1985, in cooperation with the Committee's U.K. branch. (See page 235.) For details contact Mary Rose Hays, CSICOP, Box 229, Buffalo, NY 14215-0229, or call her at 716-834-3222.

—Kendrick Frazier

Jaroff, Yost Presented CSICOP Journalism Awards

FOR THE FIRST time, fair and balanced reporting of paranormal claims has been recognized with the establishment of the CSICOP "Responsibility in Journalism Award." Its first recipients, Davyd Yost of the Columbus, Ohio, *Citizen Journal* and Leon Jaroff, formerly managing editor of *Discover* and now sciences editor of *Time*, attended the presentation at the CSICOP 1984 conference opening banquet on November 9.

SKEPTICAL INQUIRER editor Kendrick Frazier presented the award to Yost, whose restrained and skeptical articles about the Columbus, Ohio, "poltergeist" captured CSICOP's attention. "In the mold of careful, responsible journalism, he reported the claims straightforwardly, as one must do as a daily newspaper reporter," said Frazier in awarding the plaque. "But each story made a special effort to go beyond the 'he said' statement, the claims that most of the other media took at face value. Each one offered skeptical scrutiny and made some special effort to get outside expert opinion."

As managing editor of *Discover*,



Leon Jaroff receives CSICOP "Responsibility in Journalism Award" from Phil Klass.

Leon Jaroff established the "Skeptical Eye" column, which examines paranormal claims. In presenting the award, CSICOP Fellow and *Aviation Week and Space Technology* senior editor Philip Klass cited Jaroff's "political courage" in committing himself to a "regular column that seeks to provide useful perspectives—if not debunking—of some claims of the paranormal."

Klass said that the media have two approaches to reporting paranormal claims: "pandering" to the public's interest in the extraordinary or ignoring it. "Leon Jaroff decided not simply to ignore such things, but to actually feature them—to consider them and give them feature treatment."

Noted Frazier: "There are many responsible reporters who want to do a good job in covering these kinds of controversial, exotic topics. We want to acknowledge and encourage this kind of positive effort in responsible reporting."

—Andrea Szalanski

First Get-Together of Local CSICOP-Type Groups

A FEW HOURS before the start of the banquet that kicked off the 1984 CSICOP conference on November 9, an afternoon session was held to bring together in informal discussions