BOOK REVIEW

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Parapsychology and the Skeptics: A Scientific Argument for the Existence of ESP, by Chris Carter. Pittsburgh, PA: Paja Books, SterlingHouse, 2007, 218 pp., xxi, bibliography, index, $18.95 pb (ISBN: 9781585011084).

Chris Carter's recent book, *Parapsychology and the Skeptics*, is a treatment of parapsychology's place in science at large and the plausibility of skeptical arguments raised against the field's methods and findings. The framework of the book proceeds from and returns to the history and philosophy of science. Its substantive core focuses on the issue of evidence for the existence of extrasensory perception (ESP), the impact on wider science if the evidence for ESP becomes accepted, and whether parapsychology itself is, in fact, a science. Uniquely, not only did Carter evaluate the evidence for ESP accumulated by scientific parapsychologists but he also analyzed the quality—or lack therein—of the research conducted by skeptics, the latter enterprise painfully absent from the published literature. Although not directly addressing the controversies surrounding near-death experience research, *Parapsychology and the Skeptics*, provides a picture of the more general debate that readers of this *Journal* will find highly relevant and informative.

Although throughout the book Carter relied somewhat uncritically on Popper's (1965) *Conjectures and Refutations* and Russell's (1946)

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History of Western Philosophy, he used the inevitable *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1996) to good advantage. In his discussion of the evidential basis of the field, he reviewed psychokinesis (PK) research, ESP research using the Ganzfeld technique, and the research conducted by two prominent skeptics, English psychologists Susan J. Blackmore and Richard Wiseman. Carter's discussion of the impact of psi on science turned on an assessment of the underpinnings of "disbelief" and the tension between classical and modern physics. As the book concluded, the author analyzed the failings of organized skepticism and the institutional status of the field of parapsychology, once again in the context of the philosophy of science. His take-home message is that mainstream scientists are resistant to the evidence for psi phenomena because they are saddled with both an ignorance of scientific parapsychology's body of published experimental literature and an adherence to an outdated "metaphysics of science" (p. 137) that wholly misunderstands modern physics. Further, Carter said, mainstream scientists fear the ridicule of organized skeptics who have made it their business to debunk the evidence, not through credible disconfirmatory research but rather through evidentially empty but nonetheless effective rhetoric. The fourth source of resistance is one that the parapsychology research community works to rectify, albeit under the socioeconomic constraints of skepticism, that is: "the inability to explain psi with the generally accepted theories of biology and psychology" (p. 137).

Chris Carter was educated at Oxford University and has degrees in economics, philosophy, and finance. After working for Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco as a financial and statistical analyst, he became a mathematics and philosophy instructor first in the high school and then in the international baccalaureate program at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. Although this was his first book, Carter has written articles on intelligent design and standardized testing. He is very well read both in the history of the field and in its experimental literature, as well as in modern physics. He brings an insightful critical sense not only to the findings of scientific parapsychology but also to the work of skeptics who routinely criticize the field.

On the other hand, his use of current history of science in his early chapters was somewhat naïve. Carter dated the Scientific Revolution as beginning with Galileo's birth in 1564 and ending with Isaac Newton's death in 1727. Not only does this range of years involve a significantly wide and variegated expanse in time and culture that

disallows such precise dating, but this and other sweeping statements he made, such as "The culmination of this revolution was surely the publication of Newton's *Principia* in 1687" (p. 5), show a regrettable lack of familiarity with recent and fine-grained scholarship of European science from the late Renaissance to the Enlightenment. For some decades now, scholars have doubted that a finite Scientific Revolution *as such* ever took place (e.g., Dear, 2001; Lindberg & Westman, 1990; Shapin, 1996). For many more decades, history of science scholars have also moved beyond hagiographical treatises on "great men" and "great books" and instead focused their attention on the complexities of discovery, science practice, and the scientific life. For example, historians have examined the disjuncture between laboratory notebooks and equipment capacities and the myths that have grown up around individual scientists and their discoveries (e.g., Shapin & Schaffer, 1989) as well as the complex relationship of scientists' personal interests and their contributions to "modern" science (e.g., Dobbs, 2002).

Something hagiographical is visible in Carter's brief person-centered depiction of the early history of psychical research and parapsychology. Further, the author misidentified the cast of characters who made up what Gauld (1968) has called the "Engine Room" of the Society for Psychical Research. Although the philosopher Henry Sidgwick was mentioned as one of the luminaries involved in the founding of the organization, he was displaced from his position as both a key member of the early core group and the husband of Eleanor Balfour. Carter married Mrs. Sidgwick off instead to Australian parapsychologist Richard Hodgson who, although active in the early SPR, was known more for his key role in the rejuvenation of the American Society for Psychical Research some decades later (and who never married). Although the author emphasized the contribution of the Balfour family as a whole—a good point that is not made often enough—he missed two of its most important members: the Cambridge physicist John Strutt (Lord Rayleigh) and his wife, Evelyn Balfour (Lady Rayleigh). Both Eleanor and Evelyn Balfour served as assistants to Strutt, and both were self-educated to a very high degree, Eleanor being especially proficient in science and mathematics. It was through their interest in formal higher education for women that they met Henry Sidgwick, an ardent campaigner in the 1870s for the founding of a college at Cambridge to which women might be admitted (e.g., Schultz, 2004; Sidgwick, 1938).

Carter also made the common mistake of attributing the founding of the American Society for Psychical Research to William James, who was an early member but not a founding member. A professor of medicine, Charles Sedgwick Minot, and an astronomer, Edward Pickering, both at Harvard, along with the then-acting editor of *Science*, N. D. C. Hodges, deserve the "founder" honors for the American Society (Noonan, 1977; Taylor, 1985).

The early history of American experimental parapsychology also suffers: Only J. B. Rhine of the early group was mentioned. Louisa E. Rhine, his life partner and collaborator, was nowhere to be found. Carter mentioned J. Gaither Pratt only as "research assistant Gaither Pratt" (p. 39) when Pratt began as a graduate student subject and became one of the principal collaborators in the laboratory after he completed his doctorate. Also overlooked was Charles E. Stuart, another early subject/graduate student who became a principal investigator. On the other hand, the controversy that followed the publication of Rhine's (1934) monograph, *Extrasensory Perception*, was well summarized, as was the publication and reception of the response written by Rhine's team to criticism published between 1934 and 1939, *Extrasensory Perception after Sixty Years* (Pratt, Rhine, Stuart, Smith, & Greenwood, 1940). Both the importance of that later volume to the establishment of the evidence for ESP and Charles Honorton's (1993) treatment of the era were well-described.

As Carter moved away from the history and into the substantive material, his true gifts shone through. The book as a whole was very well-written and closely argued. The details of the development of PK research as it moved from physical mediumship—exemplified by nineteenth century medium D. D. Home—to the dice-throwing PK experiments of the Rhine Lab was brief but informative. Helmut Schmidt's work on PK devices and his development of sources of randomness led into the work of the recently closed Princeton Engineering Anomalies Laboratory. Physicist Evan Harris Walker's notion of PK as not "… a force, but rather as a type of information flow from the consciousness of the observer to the indeterminate quantum state" (p. 47) foreshadowed well subsequent sections that dealt with physics and psi phenomena.

Carter's treatment of research into telepathy passed over early dream telepathy experiments all too quickly (Ullman, Krippner & Vaughn, 2003), but the emphasis on Charles Honorton's Ganzfeld ESP research and what Carter called "The Great Ganzfeld Debate" more

than made up for this omission. The reasons for attempting to provide a research subject with an altered-state-inducing environment were well described, as were the principle criticisms of the research and Honorton's responses (pp. 53–67). Equally well described was the controversy over how the National Research Council's (Druckman & Swets, 1988) report was structured from the beginning to debunk the findings of ESP research whether or not its expert commentators agreed with that position. As the author noted, the report amply illustrates how so-called "impartial" reports can fail to rise to any reasonable level of objectivity (pp. 57–60).

Carter also handled Milton and Wiseman's (1999) flawed "replication" of Bem and Honorton's (1994) Ganzfeld ESP meta-analysis very well. His arguments lead the reader to the conclusion that "[Ray] Hyman and the other skeptics have lost the ganzfeld debate" (p. 66). Carter hammered the point home: through his review of the revisionist "spin" skeptic Susan J. Blackmore put on the chronology, importance, and substance of her own research (pp. 69–73); through his examination of the errors of design and analysis made by skeptic Richard Wiseman in an attempt to debunk Rupert Sheldrake's (e.g., Sheldrake & Smart, 1998) work on animals who seem to anticipate their owners' return (pp. 73–82); and through an able outline of the pointlessness of becoming involved in magician James Randi's so-called "challenge" (pp. 82–85).

From Chapter 12 through the end of the volume, Carter took his arguments to another level. He examined the supposed disconnect between the evidence offered by scientific parapsychology and modern physics and showed quite clearly that the forms of skeptical positions exemplified by Blackmore and Wiseman are based on a misunderstanding of modern physics that borders on mythology as well as a willingness to make statements that are patently false such as: "For instance, Hyman has written that a 'serious challenge to parapsychology's quest for scientific status is the lack of cumulativeness in its database. Only parapsychology, among the fields of inquiry claiming scientific status, lacks a cumulative database' [Hyman, 1996)]" (Carter, 2007, p. 143).

To this erroneous assertion, Carter replied:

> As mentioned earlier, in 1940 J. B. Rhine published his landmark book *Extrasensory Perception after Sixty Years* that summarized all quantitative experiments since the founding of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. How can we reconcile Hyman's claim

> that parapsychology 'lacks a cumulative database' with the existence of this book, considered a classic of experimental parapsychology? And if a cumulative database for psi experiments does not exist, then how could Radin and Nelson have performed their meta-analysis of [random number generator] PK experiments conducted between 1959 and 1987? How could Radin and Ferrari have conducted their meta-analysis of PK dice experiments using results of experiments dating back to the 1930s? Meta-analysis is *by definition* the analysis of cumulated experiments [Radin & Ferrari, 1991; Radin & Nelson, 1989]. (Carter, 2007, p. 143)

One brief correction is warranted here: *Extrasensory Perception after Sixty Years* (*ESP*-60) was a collaborative effort which, although guided by Rhine's plan, was written largely by Gaither Pratt, with contributions of other team members woven into the resulting text. *ESP-60* was published with Pratt as the first author, then Rhine, then Parapsychology Laboratory members Burke M. Smith, Charles E. Stuart, and Joseph Greenwood and therefore should not be attributed to Rhine alone (Zingrone, 2006).

Even considering the few criticisms I have raised, Carter's *Parapsychology and the Skeptics* is a masterful work. His emphasis on the successes of parapsychology and the failures of some skeptics worked beautifully into the last section of his book. There he argued convincingly that if modern physics is born in mind, not only are psi phenomena *not* anomalous, but they are in fact *entailed*. He further argued that the continued controversy, rather than being the result of a failure of psychical research and parapsychology to gather and present credible evidence, is actually more the result of what Honorton called (and Carter quoted) the "polemical campaigns that distort and misrepresent serious research efforts" (p. 181).

The volume will appeal not only to beleaguered psychical researchers and parapsychologists but also to anyone who works in a field that is tinged by scientific taboo, such as the field of near-death studies. Sociologists and historians of science will also find it useful as a way into the enduring controversy it covers. Carter is to be wholeheartedly commended for this well-argued addition to the literature.

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