

## Correspondence

### E.S.P.: A SCIENTIFIC EVALUATION

DEAR SIR,

In a recent review of C. E. M. Hansel's book on E.S.P. (*Journal*, May, 1968, pp. 653-658), the reviewer introduces a lengthy quotation from one of my books in which I say that "the only conclusion the unbiased observer can come to must be that there does exist a small number of people who obtain knowledge existing either in other people's minds, or in the outer world, by means yet unknown to Science". On the basis of Hansel's book the reviewer states that "it would seem that Eysenck's 'unbiased observer' has been hypnotized by the majesty of numbers of a more than astronomical magnitude". Unless I am still in a state of hypnosis I can only say that as far as I am concerned this just is not true. High levels of statistical significance are important, but only of course when the experiments in question are properly controlled; we shall come to this point in a minute. What has impressed me more than simple numbers has been the lawfulness of certain events occurring within runs, such as the fall-off of scores, which is reported again and again and which resembles what is often found in vigilance experiments. This is particularly impressive because it was not originally looked for and was found on going back over some of the older records when this effect was not even thought of and could therefore hardly have been faked. Another kind of lawfulness appears when we look at the personality traits of good and poor performers; as expected on my theory, extraverts tend to do well, introverts badly (Eysenck, 1967).

However, everything of course depends on the care taken to exclude the possibility of cheating, and here the reviewer simply paraphrases some of Hansel's criticisms; he makes no effort to discuss them critically. This is unfortunate, because Hansel, although an astute and knowledgeable expert in this field, is not infallible; Stevenson (1967) has pointed out a large number of clear-cut errors, both of omission and commission, on his part, and one would have expected an unbiased review to draw attention to these.

As an example, consider the Pearce-Pratt experiment, which is quoted in the review as a prize example of Hansel's method of debunking. It will be remembered that Hansel alleges that Pearce, the subject, could have locked himself in Room 311 and

observed Pratt (the experimenter) by standing on a chair or table and looking through a transom. Stevenson went to Duke University to check on the facts, and to look at the rooms in question and to consult architect's plans of all changes made. He finds that Room 311 is not in fact opposite Room 314 (where Pratt was sitting), as shown in Hansel's diagram, but is down the hall next to Room 313 and "could under no circumstances have served as a sighting place for the inspection of the cards". So much for this conclusive piece of debunking; all it demonstrates is Hansel's inaccuracy and lack of care in making his serious allegations, and the reviewer's credulity in accepting Hansel's word without checking with the people who were familiar with the facts, or reading the reviews pointing out this and other serious errors in Hansel's account.

The reviewer concludes that "the unbiased observer can dismiss the whole topic; there is no need for him to concern himself about it any more", and he goes on to say that those who maintain an interest in these phenomena represent "the rear-guard stragglers from defeats suffered in the Copernican, the Darwinian, and the Freudian revolutions". The suggestion is presumably that those who are impressed by the evidence have an emotional need to believe; in answer to this many psychic researchers have countered by alleging a similar need to disbelieve in their critics. Such arguments *ad hominem* are unlikely to advance us very far; clearly what is needed is an unbiased evaluation of the facts. Hansel's book, interesting and important though it undoubtedly is, should not be taken as the last word in this connection, and the review, by the uncritical welcome it gives to all of Hansel's conclusions, is unlikely to make the atmosphere more conducive to the unemotional appraisal of facts. All of us who are interested in this field are aware of the difficulties, the complications, and the endless artifacts which beset our path; in this at least E.S.P. research does not seem to differ all that much from other branches of psychiatry or psychology! Perhaps the time has come when the humility of the experimenter should find an echo in a corresponding humility of the critic.

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## REFERENCES

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- STEVENSON, I. (1967). "An antagonist's view of parapsychology. A review of Professor Hansel's *E.S.P.: A Scientific Evaluation*." *J. Amer. Soc. psych. Res.*, 61, 224-267.

DEAR SIR,

I write in defence of E.S.P. research because I think your reviewer has been misled. Professor Hansel is the latest in a long line of critics claiming to have disposed of this superstition, but like his predecessors he overstates his case. He makes some good points, but his interpretations of events become much less plausible when the full facts are taken into account.

One can readily agree that E.S.P. is scientifically controversial, since there have been no strictly repeatable experiments, no discoveries as to how it operates, and no successes in integrating the phenomenon into rational theory. All the same, a large body of sporadic evidence exists. If all of this must be written off as due to incompetence and fraudulent reporting it follows that on certain topics human testimony is valueless. The pursuit of E.S.P. research may, in the end, lead to just this conclusion, but I do not think we have got there yet.

Evidence for E.S.P. stems from four main sources. (1) Reports of spontaneous impressions in dreams, intuitions and so forth. (2) The occurrence in verbal material from spiritualist mediums and other supposedly "psychic" individuals of information apparently derived by E.S.P. (3) Experiments in guessing at hidden targets using unselected persons as subjects which have yielded slight deviations from chance expectation. (4) Guessing experiments with special subjects who have demonstrated substantial and persistent success in repeated tests under careful scrutiny. Hansel is right to point out that there have been only a few of these outstanding episodes, but by considering in detail only this particular category he contrives to give the impression that the evidence for E.S.P. is more limited than is in fact the case.

Dr. Slater quotes in his review Hansel's criticism of the card-guessing tests at a distance conducted by Gaither Pratt with the high scoring subject, Hubert Pearce. Pratt, who was in charge of the target cards in his room on the top floor of the Duke University physics building, could see from the window Pearce cross the quadrangle below and enter the library where he sat while recording his guesses. Since he was left unsupervised, Hansel supposes he must have crept back unnoticed and peered into Pratt's room through the corridor window. Professor Ian Stevenson, in reviewing Hansel's book (*J. Amer.*

*Soc. psychical Res.* 1967, 61, 254-267), made an on-the-spot investigation. He found Hansel's published diagram most inaccurate. The bottom of the window in question was six feet from the floor, so the subject would have had to stand on something for hours at a time in a busy corridor. There was a room on the opposite side of the corridor from which, by standing on a chair and looking through the transom and then through Pratt's corridor window, a view might have been obtained, but this was a research room and likely to have been occupied at the relevant times or otherwise locked up. In short, Hansel's explanation was much less likely than it sounded.

Of course, it would have been more sensible to have had Pearce watched, but this experiment took place in the early days of card-guessing before more formal procedures became routine. At the time Pratt could not have realized that results such as this would prove to be so unusual that we should still be debating thirty-five years later whether they occurred at all.

S. G. Soal's work with the subjects Shackleton and Stewart was a more important demonstration since it continued over a longer period and involved more persons and more precautions against fraud. In the Shackleton case Hansel has to postulate a variety of elaborate methods of trickery which would require the collusion of at least three of the other participants besides Soal himself. R. G. Medhurst (*J. Soc. psychical Res.* 1968, 44, 217-232) has rebutted the only instances in which Hansel raised the slightest positive evidence that any trick actually occurred. The most dramatic of these was the assertion by Mrs. Albert, one of the agents who looked at the targets in some of the tests, that she had seen Soal altering figures on the score sheets. Hansel failed to report that photostats of the score sheets showed no signs of significant alterations, or that the lady also asserted that she had smoked one of Shackleton's cigarettes and found it to be drugged, though many others had smoked his cigarettes without ill effect.

Parapsychologists ought not to be blamed for difficulties intrinsic to their material, such as the rarity and impermanence of high-scoring subjects. Dr. Slater considers it reprehensible that such subjects have not been passed from one experimenter to another as an elementary precaution. As a matter of fact, one of the best features of Pavel Stepanek of Prague, the latest star subject, is that he had worked successfully for a succession of experimenters from different countries. One can appreciate why Soal, having spent years looking for subjects, should have hoarded to himself the few he eventually discovered. But even Soal allowed enough to be done by others to show that results did not depend