

Stephen E. BRAUDE, *Dangerous Pursuits: Mediumship, Mind, and Music*. San Antonio TX, Anomalist Books, 2020, 15,2 × 22,8 cm, 334 p., ISBN 978-1-949-50115-5

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The miracle of the holy thorn was acclaimed as a great victory for Port Royal. Prior to the Mass on the day of the miracle, they had prayed in words drawn from Psalm 86: "Fac mecum signum in bonum..." ("Show me a token of good, that they which hate me may see it and be ashamed...") It seemed that God had vindicated Jansenists and exposed the dishonesty of their Jesuit critics.

In the *Journal* entry for April 3, 1656, Saint-Gilles, gives a short account of the miracle of March 24th. The events surrounding the *sainte épine* also moved the great Arnauld to include an account of miracles in his *Port-Royal Logic*, published a few years later. I have argued elsewhere that the account Arnauld gives of miracles in that place anticipates, and even challenges, the sneering critique of miracles that Hume would produce a century later.⁵

The *Journal* opens many windows onto the daily life of cultivated associates of Port-Royal in a time of struggle, but also onto common European life in the late seventeenth century. Furthermore, it has the serendipitous merit of being significant to readers anywhere today. It depicts a historical period not unlike our own, misshapen by government overreach, divisive politics, lies, fake news, hysteria, with capital crimes committed, barely reported, and excused.

We like to think we are the first orphans of civilization, but Saint-Gilles tells us we are not orphans at all. Instead, we are descendents of the family of Mother Angélique, Abbess of Port-Royal, and her younger brother Antoine Arnauld; also of the family of Pascal and his niece Marguerite; and of course of the solitary Saint-Gilles.

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Stephen E. BRAUDE, **Dangerous Pursuits: Mediumship, Mind, and Music**. San Antonio TX, Anomalist Books, 2020, 15,2 × 22,8 cm, 334 p., ISBN 978-1-949-50115-5.

Stephen Braude's *Dangerous Pursuits* presents the author's latest work focused on the philosophical issues surrounding parapsychology, as well as his personal experiences investigating, testing, and attempting to verify the reality of paranormal phenomena. Less of a singular work than a collection of related essays, a number of common threads run throughout all the pieces included in this book, allowing each to make a relevant contribution to the discussion (including the final chapter, which, in spite of its topic, on the subject of jazz performance, has something to say about the possibility of clairvoyant connections with others on a more everyday level). With relatively short, focused chapters, Braude's book provides a concise, yet multifaceted overview

5. See Graeme HUNTER, "Arnauld's Defence of Miracles and its Context," in Elmar KREMER (ed.), *Interpreting Arnauld*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, pp. 11-126.

of a topic he has been writing upon for many years. It also provides his most recent, up-to-date thoughts on several aspects of parapsychology and the paranormal, both as a discipline and the specific phenomena studied within that discipline.

Before beginning, a word should be said on the title, which comes from the academic snobbery Braude has often encountered, as someone who pursues and publishes work in the area of parapsychology/paranormal investigation (even if one proceeds as carefully as Braude does, when establishing controls or asking questions). As a result, the chapters dealing directly with Braude's personal experiences include not only the phenomena he witnessed, but also an exhausting list of controls, limitations, and possible alternative explanations, all of which take up a large part of his discussion. I note this, together with Braude's mention, at the beginning of the book, that he waited until he had tenure before making his interest and investigations into paranormal activity public. (Loc. 56) However, in pointing this out and detailing his methods so extensively (or entitling his book the way he has), Braude is neither criticizing the small-mindedness of other academics, nor does he appear to be feeling sorry for himself; rather, Braude expresses his frustration that such an interesting (and potentially revolutionary) area of investigation is being so willfully ignored by the very people best in a position to benefit from the knowledge that investigation might provide (whatever it might be). Braude, then, is one of a few people capable of making these titular "dangerous pursuits" into investigating the unknown, and those with a genuine interest in such things (myself included) remain grateful for his (otherwise) unpopular efforts.

Also of note, before beginning with an overview of the individual chapters/themes, is Braude's suggestion, which he comes back to frequently, that so-called paranormal phenomena such as psychic communication or extrasensory perception (commonly called "ESP," but from here on referred to as "psi," according to Braude's use of the term) are not really paranormal at all, but quite common, and may underlie much of our everyday social interactions (what Braude calls "being in the zone," experiences of rapport or personal connection, resulting in lively conversation, or performance for a receptive audience, for example). (Loc. 5647-5666) If Braude is correct, then the academic hostility toward psi investigation is not only unfounded, but an obstacle to better understanding the dynamics of basic human interaction. Most of the essays in this book, therefore, focus as much on academic attitudes toward psi/paranormal activity as Braude's other interests, the possibility of psi, mediumship, and life after death (evidence of "postmortem survivors," in Braude's terms). (Loc. 1515, et al.)

In Chapter 1, Braude begins with a look at the negative reception his post-tenure work has received, since he made his interest public. While this has been discussed already, this chapter also reviews how that attitude has changed over the past 100 years: more than a century ago, William James (as did other contemporary philosophers, such as Charlie Dunbar Broad) made no secret of their curiosity about the possibility of psi: mediums, clairvoyance, and other psychic phenomena. This idea is revisited again in Chapter 10, where Braude discusses the attitude of nineteenth-century philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce, though sceptical of the idea of psychic mediums, nevertheless felt that the curiosity the subject generated necessitated investigation, and that parapsychology was, in the name of science, a worth-

while topic of study, recognizing that unless we venture beyond our own particular areas of expertise/specialization, we will be incapable of making judgments regarding things which lie beyond our experience: "We [scientific men] are blind to our own blindness; but the world seems to declare us simply incapable of rising from narrowness and specialism to take broad view of any facts whatsoever." (Loc. 5058)

In addition, Braude also speculates on an underlying cause of this shift in attitude toward the paranormal: the possibility that psi powers/abilities/knowledge come unconsciously from within the individual, rather than being outside forces one comes into contact with. If one's subconscious mind is capable of "reaching out" and affecting the world according to desires/wishes we would prefer to resist or deny, then the responsibility these powers/abilities would place on us would be too great for most of us to face. Braude imagines that the hostility of so many to the prospect of paranormal powers/activity is an avoidance strategy of sorts that allows us to circumvent the inevitable obligations which would accompany psi powers.

Though Chapter 1 ends on a speculative note, Chapters 2 and 3 showcase Braude's methodological diligence when personally examining claims of paranormal activity. These two chapters, which cover a period of approximately five years (March 2010-October 2015), focus on Braude's time with the Felix Experimental Group (FEG), a circle of physical mediums from Germany. In rather exhaustive detail, Braude describes a series of *séances* conducted by the group, which he not only attended but placed under strict controls as he observed them. Braude also presents evidence of at least one example of fraud within the circle (the use of a small LED-like light with a wire, possibly used for the purpose of misdirection during the *séance*) (Loc. 1459), which he contrasts with the inexplicable events he observed in spite of the controls he put in place (including table levitations, during which he kept his hand and foot on the arm and foot of the medium on his left side, while an assistant did the same on the medium's right side), and – perhaps most dramatically – what Braude describes as an ectoplasmic arm emerging and reaching out from the mouth of the medium. (Loc. 433) Braude, having done strip searches of the medium and watching him dress before the *séances* began (as well as a careful examination of the rooms where the *séances* took place), was unable to explain how the medium might have produced this effect.

The ultimate conclusion of Braude's observations is ambiguous, for he is only able to present his observations and what took place in spite of the controls. Yet while he is not able to explain much of what he saw, he is not able to identify what, exactly, he saw either (during his last set of sittings, Braude even narrowed his focus strictly to the phenomenon of table levitation, so as to spend all his attention on the observation/explanation of that one aspect). (Loc. 1485) His inability to provide more substantial answers means his report will never convince a decided, incredulous sceptic, but neither will it provide solid validation for believers. Braude only presents his observations, offers his personal assessment of those observations, and leaves readers to draw conclusions of their own. Ultimately, only future, stricter controls might yield clearer results.

The theme of sceptical hostility to paranormal claims returns as the focus of Chapters 4 and 5. These two chapters present Braude's assessment of the careers of two mediums of the past century and a half: Daniel Dunglas Home (1833-1886) and

spiritualist Carmine Mirabelli (1889-1951), in light of more contemporary presentations of their feats and claims. Braude's review of Trevor Hall's book, *The Enigma of Daniel Home: Medium or Fraud?*¹ makes his frustration apparent, as Braude notes the (apparently) willful ignoring of potentially paradigm-shifting events/reports, as he notes a number of omissions and misrepresentations, as presented by Home (which Braude is able to verify elsewhere by means of research of his own). Braude suggests that compelling, already-verified reports have been sidelined by Hall, in favor of *ad hominem* fallacies regarding Home's vanity and irresponsible spending habits, as if this somehow undermined any talents or psi powers he might have had: Braude reminds readers that "neither sainthood nor a mere absence of character weaknesses are prerequisites for possessing psi ability." (Loc. 2497)

Among the other questions which Braude considers in the subsequent chapters of *Dangerous Pursuits* include theoretical reflections on whether or not the term "super-psi" (extreme psi abilities) makes sense (by what standard would it be considered "super"?), (Chapter 6), the possibility that "super-psi," if it exists, rather than ghosts or spirits, might explain reports of mediums in contact with the dead (powerful mediums may be receiving their knowledge from the living, rather than the dead) (Chapter 7), the nature of subjective perception for any possible postmortem survivors (how, for example, would a survivor see without eyes or know or think without a brain?) (Chapter 8). There are also historical reflections, including the aforementioned chapters on Peirce's attitude to the paranormal (Chapter 10), and a reflection on the author's own experience of a kind of telepathy (or some other ineffable connection) between musical performers like himself, other musicians, and their audiences (Chapter 12).

Reflecting on the book in retrospect, I would contrast Braude's rational, open approach to a topic often dismissed by other authors who champion the "rational": individuals such as Carl Sagan, who, in his *Demon-Haunted World*² (1996), dismisses psychics by citing only the less-than credible ones featured on television infomercials (Sagan p. 99) and advertisements in "alien abduction tracts" (p. 129). While Sagan claims to be committed to reason, my earlier review of Justin E.H. Smith's *Irrationality*³ suggested that an obsession with being rational may result in a failure to accept/recognize the less-rational aspects of our own human natures, or the world we live in. Braude's *Dangerous Pursuits* is, therefore, a fitting and important follow-up to my reading of Smith's book, showing how a mind open to possibility, even the most outlandish or seemingly impossible one, when tempered with an inquisitive, yet cautious approach, might reveal far more about our world (and human abilities) than dismissive, incredulous contempt.

To conclude this review, it must be noted once more how Stephen Braude has continued to defy expectations and put his credibility at risk by not only making his

1. Trevor H. HALL, *Enigma of Daniel Home: Medium or Fraud? The Mystery of Britain's Most Famous Spiritualist Unraveled*, Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 1984.

2. Carl SAGAN, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, London: Headline Book Publishing, 1996.

3. Justin E.H. SMITH, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019; reviewed in *Science et Esprit*, 74 (2022), pp. 439-441.

interest in parapsychology public, but by publishing rigorous, high-quality examples of research in an area of study often dismissed, disregarded, or outright derided. *Dangerous Pursuits* continues to test the limits of possibility, presenting Braude's controlled observations frankly and honestly, and not shying away from trickery or downplaying fraud when he encounters it. Throughout the book, Braude uses his critical reasoning to evaluate the observations of writers less open to possibility, and to speculate on how so-far unanswered questions pertaining to paranormal activity (the perceptual means of spirits, or the meaning/relevance of terms like "super-psi," etc.) might be answered. Braude remains focused and methodical from start to finish, and so is his book.

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John C. MÉDAILLE and Thomas STORCK, **Theology: Mythos or Logos? A Dialogue on Faith, Reason, and History**. Tacoma WA, Angelico Press, 2020, 178 p., 13,9 × 21,5 cm, ISBN-13: 978-1-62138-663-6.

Theology: Mythos or Logos? is inspired by Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates' rational discourse and questioning quickly overwhelm the naïve simplicity of the Athenian prophet Euthyphro's theological worldview ("Are holy things loved by the gods because they are holy, or are they holy because they are loved by the gods?") (10a). In the original dialogue by Plato, the question proves to be a problematic one for Euthyphro (for it suggests that goodness and holiness are either arbitrary, dictated by the will of the gods, or else principles to which even the gods are subjected). Over the course of their discussion, Socrates suggests that Euthyphro's beliefs about what is "good" and "holy" are neither clear nor distinct, and may even prove to be meaningless, if indeed they are determined by the whims of inconsistent (and often disagreeable) gods.

In this book, the authors John C. Médaille and Thomas Storck take it upon themselves to carry on the discussion, with Médaille taking up the unenviable task of defending Euthyphro (as Euthyphro himself was not up to the mark). Over the course of their correspondence (the 16 letters which comprise the book, along with the full text of *Euthyphro*, included at the end as an appendix), the discussion continues. *Theology: Mythos or Logos?* is interesting as an epistolary text, a contemporary dialogue between two more evenly matched minds; while Euthyphro himself lacked the ability to respond effectively to Socrates' questions on the spot, the format of this book allows both participants to respond at length, and with deliberation, each taking the time to think carefully about the other's words before responding.

The discussion begins with Médaille offering an understanding of theology based, not on reason, but on some other form of experience. Médaille notes the drastic difference between the objects of worship and the gods of philosophy; after all, "[h]ymns to the pure ideas are rather rare, and liturgies that invoke the *primum mobile* are not well attended." While such ideas of divinity may flow reasonably from logic,