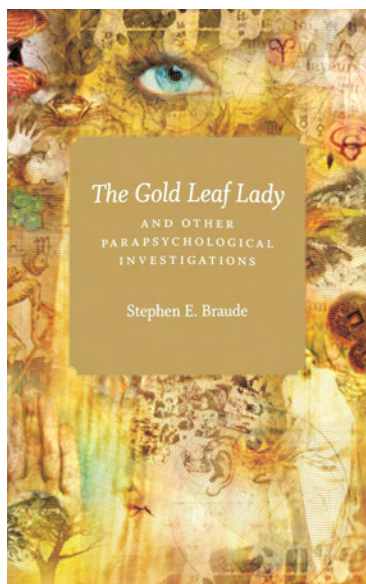


BOOK REVIEW



Stephen E. Braude

*The Gold Leaf Lady
and Other Parapsychological Investigations*

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Reviewed by Ulrich Mohrhoff

Meet Katie, a Florida housewife whose most intriguing psychic feature is the ability to manifest sizable patches of golden foil (actually brass) on various regions of her body. Unlike some of her other unusual capacities — she has been videotaped writing quatrains in medieval French, ostensibly from Nostradamus, and similar in both style and content to Nostradamus’s actual quatrains — this ability is beyond her control. Not surprisingly, she regards it as an affliction.

Meet Daniel D. Home (1833–1886), a Scottish medium, and Eusapia Palladino (1854–1918), a medium from Naples. Home’s repertoire of impressive phenomena included (i) levitating tables with several people on top, (ii) materializing warm and solid hands that would carry objects, shake hands with sitters, and then dissolve in their grasp, and (iii) causing musical instruments to play either untouched (sometimes while levitated) or handled in a way that would ordinarily prevent a musical performance. Home’s mediumship lasted almost twenty-five years, and during that time he was never detected in fraud (despite the inevitable second or thirdhand allegations to the contrary).¹ Eusapia, on the other hand, did sometimes cheat (to spite investigators who treated her condescendingly and disrespectfully as well as for the sheer heck of it) but was never found cheating under

1 Home’s phenomena were examined extensively in the U.S. and in Europe. Especially convincing are the tests conducted by the highly distinguished physicist Sir William Crookes. On-line resources: W. Crookes, “Experimental Investigation of a New Force” [↗](#), first published in *Quarterly Journal of Science*, 1871; W. Crookes, “Psychic Force and Modern Spiritualism” [↗](#), first published in *Quarterly Journal of Science*, 1874.

the tight experimental conditions imposed by her most competent and more respectful investigators.²

Stephen Braude is the author of this riveting book, *The Gold Leaf Lady*, and he personally figures in the accounts of the next two chapters, alongside Joe Nuzum, Alex Imich, and Dennis Lee. Braude is professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the author of this riveting book. For over thirty years he has studied the paranormal in everyday life, from extrasensory perception and psychokinesis to channeling and materialization. Nuzum is an alleged PK (psychokinesis) superstar with a special knack for avoiding to perform under well-controlled conditions. At the 15th Annual Meeting of the Society for Scientific Exploration, Braude came within a hair's breadth of concluding that "Joe is a fraud who tries consistently to subvert or circumvent reasonable controls," adding that "if Joe is a genuine psychic, as his supporters continue to maintain, he at least seems to be of no value as a subject."

The experiments that Braude conducted with Nuzum had been sponsored by Imich, who longed for a "conclusive demonstration that would convince the entire scientific community that PK was real." Lee is a subject from California who in informal settings seems able to produce impressive psychokinetic effects. Imich contrived to prevent Lee from demonstrating such effects in tests conducted by Braude, apparently to retaliate against Braude for his assessment of Nuzum. The trials and tribulations of a parapsychologist!

A chapter featuring an Annapolis policeman remarkably blinded by his own credulousness (whose testimony can you trust?) is followed by a postscript to the famous case of Ted Serios, a "thoughtographer" who in the 1960s produced images and other effects on Polaroid film under well-controlled conditions. In Chapter 7 we meet Braude in his capacity as philosopher reflecting on synchronicity (meaningful but supposedly acausal coincidence), and in the final chapter we meet his wife Gina, an academic and clinical psychologist who also happens to be a virtuoso astrologer. Gina has successfully used her astrological skills to help several European and Asian professional soccer teams rise to the top of their respective leagues. Her startlingly detailed and accurate predictions were also highly valued within the Serbian mafia!

Braude skillfully uses these cases to raise and discuss a variety of issues. Why, for instance, do such spectacular phenomena as were observed during the eighty-year period from about 1850 to about 1930 no longer seem to occur? (Advances in technology benefit frauds and debunkers in equal measures, and gullibility doesn't seem to have decreased since.) Again, whence the widespread fear of psi in general and of PK in particular? The answer, Braude suggests, lies in the fact that it is a small step from psychokinetically nudging a matchstick to psychokinetically causing a car crash. The responsibility for what Freud called "the omnipotence of thought" is frightening indeed.

Some paranormal abilities appear to have psychopathological origins. In addition to dis-

2 In fact, her fake productions were inferior to, and easily distinguishable from, the genuine article. Online: Eusapia Palladino, ♠, a biographical excerpt from the *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* by Nandor Fodor, 1934.

cussing Katie's case, Braude presents the striking example of a Maryland woman whose photographs show anomalies of a sort familiar to many psi researchers. One of her photos is a portrait of her cruel and domineering husband, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. To the right of his face there are some squiggly lines that seem to spell HELP. This may well be a psychically mediated unconscious cry for help, probably from the woman but possibly from her husband instead.

Braude began looking carefully at parapsychological research in 1976, five years into his career as a professional philosopher. In the Preface to *The Gold Leaf Lady* he offers us a glimpse at the treatment he since received from his colleagues. While Braude had no axe to grind (one way or the other) and simply thought that the material examined by the likes of William James and Charles S. Peirce merited even deeper study, for some this was enough to brand him as a crackpot. By now he is familiar with virtually every disgraceful behavior that academics and scientists can display. Sarcasm, employed with a presumption of authority by those who know little, if anything, about the field, and who know they lack this knowledge, is a typical reaction. Other frequently employed strategies consist in (i) dismissing all the evidence by generalizing from the obviously weakest cases and (ii) making false claims to the effect that a purportedly paranormal phenomenon has been successfully replicated (and thus debunked) by some stage magician.³

The other side of the same coin is that a number of Braude's colleagues are prepared to admit their own encounters with the paranormal to him but not to any other colleagues. This tendency also exists among health professionals. They are willing to confide apparent psychic episodes involving their patients to Braude, but make it clear that this information needs to remain confidential (and not because of client confidentiality, for patient names are rarely mentioned). This, as Braude points out, is a great shame, for these researchers are missing a potentially valuable opportunity to compare notes and possibly discover illuminating patterns in their collective data.

Braude's new book picks up where his earlier works on parapsychology (Braude 1997, 2002, 2003) left off. The main theme is the occurrence (both genuine and otherwise) of paranormal events in everyday life. By demonstrating that the quality of non-laboratory evidence is far better than even most parapsychologists make it out to be, Braude dispels a widespread myth: that parapsychological data derived from formal experimentation are necessarily superior to data from outside the lab.

Whence that myth? Many parapsychologists believe that formal laboratory experiments can do more than merely establish the existence of anomalies in need of a theory. They hope to learn something from their experiments about *how* psi works. But how could they? Ordinary physical regularities are discoverable only because it is possible to study

3 One example: On p. 119 of the *Nature* issue dated November 11, 1982, the noted science writer Martin Gardner claims that the magician James Randi "regularly" duplicates the Serios phenomena, "and with more skill." While there is no evidence that Randi ever *attempted* to duplicate these phenomena under conditions resembling those that prevailed during Serios's tests, he *failed* to duplicate them under the much looser test conditions allowed on the television show *Today* on October 4, 1967.

sufficiently simple physical systems in isolation. Paranormal regularities — regularities among anomalies in the physical regularities — involve systems that are anything but simple and almost by definition impossible to study in isolation. It is unrealistic to hope to discover regularities among these, let alone to learn how they work.

Let me add this: What classical (that is, pre-quantum) physics had to offer was algorithms for calculating the effects of given causes, not mechanisms by which causes produce their effect. What quantum physics offers instead is algorithms for calculating the probabilities of possible measurement outcomes on the basis of actual outcomes. And that's it; the rest is embroidery. Worse, the "classical" sleight of hand, which consisted in transmogrifying computational tools into bona fide physical entities, no longer works (Mohrhoff 2005, 2006). So how can we hope to understand the action of mind on matter — be it the "normal" PK studied by psychologists (volition) or the anomalous PK studied by parapsychologists — if we don't even understand how matter acts on matter!

I found Braude's discussion of synchronicity particularly stimulating. The term "synchronicity" was coined by Carl Jung for those astonishingly specific coincidences that strike us as numinous and impervious to conventional explanations. Believing that no causal explanation would work, Jung regarded synchronicity as an acausal explanatory principle. (Isn't that an oxymoron? No, says Jung, for the conservation laws of physics, Bohr's principle of complementarity, and Pauli's exclusion principle *are* such principles.) While Braude agrees with Jung that at least some synchronicities aren't simply chance occurrences which we simply take to be meaningful, his analysis leads to the conclusion the synchronicity is, after all, a causal principle of some kind.

Braude sees ordinary human agents as the instruments of synchronistically meaningful connections. The cases surveyed in *The Gold Leaf Lady* provide systematic evidence that gifted subjects can influence the physical world in conspicuous ways. Nor does this capacity seem to be limited to psychic superstars. Other cases of a more anecdotal nature strongly suggest that people can and do paranormally shape their lives in subtle and dramatic ways. Most of us know people who are remarkably coincidence-prone. Braude suspects that the best way to make sense of these individuals' lives in particular, and of synchronicity in general, is "by positing a combination of creative cognition and possibly paranormal influence over events seemingly beyond their control."



Does such influence involve ongoing and detailed psychic scanning and/or nudging of the various actors on the stage, to make sure the right people are in the right place at the right time? Braude's "magic-wand hypothesis" instead proposes a direct psychokinetic link between the intention (or wish) and the effect, unmediated by a series or collection of subprocesses. We influence events to turn out a certain way just by wishing or wanting that outcome, as long as conditions are favorable. (No individual magic wand is all-powerful. Sometimes our magic wands work in concert; more often they neutralize each other's effects.) Braude hastens to add that while a magic wand-type explanation of synchronicities seems to be "a genuine option in logical space," "we need to be extremely cautious about supposing that we or others are psychically engineering" coincidences.

I think that the magic-wand hypothesis has a lot going for it. Remember Wittgenstein: “Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is.” Why is there anything, rather than nothing at all? If there is an answer, it is likely to involve a magic wand of some kind. This possibility is strengthened by quantum physics, which, as you will recall, boils down to a set of algorithms for calculating the probabilities of possible measurement outcomes on the basis of actual outcomes. In the quantum world, everything is possible — every conceivable measurement outcome has a probability greater than zero — unless it violates a conservation law. So we don’t have to explain why something is possible (and thus *can* be actual). We only have to explain why certain things are *not* possible, and this work is done by the conservation laws. In other words, the fundamental physical laws *constrain* but do not *explain*.

And what do they constrain? If anything, an otherwise omnipotent force. (If the working of that force is intentionally self-constrained, then the qualifying “otherwise” is superfluous.) In discussing synchronicity, Braude refrains from envisioning any agent outside the sphere of human agents. But where exactly lies the boundary of this sphere? That our individual magic wands are continuous with that force — the mother of all magic wands — is certainly another genuine option in logical space.

Simply put, *The Gold Leaf Lady* is a read not to be missed. To initiate it offers valuable updates and insights. To those in conversant with the current state of parapsychological research, it may rank as the best introduction available.

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