

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor, **Palladino, and Those Who Know How She Did It**

We have no means of assessing the probability of paranormal events, since they are by 'normal' standards impossible, but we all know how to judge the likelihood of events that are deemed possible by those standards.

I thought we had reached fairly dizzy heights of inventiveness when Richard Wiseman told us at a lecture that (*inter alia*) the 'head' that apparently poked through the curtain above a seated Palladino was made by an intruder who had introduced himself into the cabinet assisted by a strong, silent and skilled furniture remover who simply moved the inter-communicating door on and off its hinges without attracting any attention. As this was not biologically impossible I assigned it a nominal probability of 0.0000001.

When this theory metamorphosed into an intrusion made via a panel cut in the door of Baggally's hotel room I dithered between adding a nought or subtracting one, but without ever coming to a firm decision. In any event, it would be around the same level as the probability that the Ganzfeld experiments carried out at Edinburgh are all due to chance.

What can one say to Polidoro and Rinaldi, who tell us that an overweight middle-aged woman, fully dressed, seated on a chair, was able, without leaning her body forward in a rather noticeable manner (her nose would have had to be close to the floor), was able to bend her left leg backwards to the point where her foot could be displayed above her head?

Perhaps this should be viewed as an alternative interpretation of an item in Palladino's extensive paranormal repertoire?

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MARY ROSE BARRINGTON

To the Editor,

Palladino and her Critics

Polidoro and Rinaldi (January 1998 issue) give odd reasons for their contemptuous dismissal of the three SPR investigators who were responsible for the Naples Report on Eusapia Palladino's genuineness as a physical medium. I fancy that most readers who followed the somewhat tortuous speculations that Richard Wiseman employed in order to show the inadequacy of the precautions taken by Feilding, Baggally and Carrington would have concluded five years ago that Barrington's and Fontana's responses had amply satisfied David Hume's criterion of belief: reject any miraculous occurrence or claim unless the alternative explanation is even more improbable than the extraordinary event it seeks to explain.

Messrs Polidoro and Rinaldi naturally make much of the occasion when an investigator, lying under the table, claimed that he caused Eusapia to scream when her liberated left foot was grasped. If we accept Hugo Munsterberg's account of this episode, what are we to make of Carrington's account of the materialization in Genoa of a complete form which then spoke in a Genoese dialect of which Eusapia was ignorant? Or, better still (since the levitation

explanation is entirely dependent on foot support) of the “many times” when the table was in the air and “we would pass a string or a fine wire up and down, between her body and the table, showing no physical connection of any kind”? These levitations had been obtained when a sitter was underneath the table, holding both the medium’s feet in his hands, while her hands were completely removed from the table, and everyone (according to Carrington’s account in *The Invisible World*, published in 1947), could see perfectly clearly that Eusapia was not touching the table at any point. He adds: “I have seen the table rise three feet and more from the floor during her séances and have had it levitate while I myself have been kneeling upon it—the medium sitting motionless in her chair, hands and feet securely held.”

Dr Carrington, with impeccable qualifications and reputation, devoted his entire career to the critical investigation of such phenomena. He had everything to lose by slovenly precautions, let alone falsification. Nor was he alone in recognising and hence being on his guard against Eusapia’s self-confessed tendency to cheat. A study of her readily recognised cheating techniques, when placed against the improbable physical contortions required to produce even a fraction of the well-attested physical phenomena, leaves us with no alternative but either to support the conclusion of that contemporary arch-sceptic Frank Podmore, that all the investigators were in a constant state of hallucination, or else conclude that the phenomena, or most of them, were genuine.

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To the Editor,

May I clarify for your readers certain points raised in Montague Keen’s reply (January 1998). As I stated in the Abstract of my article, I sought to address the fundamental argument inherent in his critical examination of the way certain skeptics select and treat evidence. I considered the argument to be fundamental because, according to Montague Keen, it “helps us to understand the reasons underlying the manner in which skeptics select and treat evidence” (p.290). I briefly illustrated the argument by outlining its main premisses and then examined them to establish whether they were acceptable, relevant or adequate to support the conclusion, a conclusion that purports to explain the manner in which certain skeptics select and treat evidence. My evaluation was that they were either unacceptable, irrelevant or inadequate to support it. Because the argument, in my view, failed to meet these criteria, it is fallacious or unsound and hence the conclusion is defective. To understand the alleged behaviour of those skeptics under examination in his article, Montague Keen will, for me at least, have to provide an adequate conclusion/hypothesis from within a more logically compelling argument.

I would also like to point out that I interpreted his argument to be related not only to those skeptics actively hostile to the very concept of paranormality (p.289), but to all skeptics who do not contend that psi does not exist, but rather that they have no forceful reason to consider that it does exist. I based this relation on his generalization “in which skeptics select and treat evidence” (p.209) This position, in my view, was further supported by the thinly-veiled uncharitable description of those skeptics in the first paragraph of his reply.