

Secrets of the Psychics: An Analysis

Critical Thinking

The Point of this Video

- I did *not* show this video:
 - To beat up on psychics or psychic claims
 - To say “Science Yay! Non-science Boo!”
- I *did* show this video:
 - To encourage the kind of critical thinking that Randi displayed
 - To reflect on how people come to believe strange (and, as Randi demonstrated, sometimes highly implausible and ridiculous) claims
- With that in mind, we can also try and tackle claims that are not as ridiculous
 - As always, it is the thinking about the claims that is important to me, not the claims themselves

Randi

- The 'Amazing' Randi is a magician who got fed up with people like Uri Geller who pretend to have 'supernatural' powers when (most likely) they do not.
- In particular, Randi has a problem with people making money off of telling people claims that cannot be justified.
- And Randi *really* has a problem with people offering other people false hope in situations of health, financial, interpersonal, or other common problems, and thereby preventing people from seeking the kind of help that might actually be effective!
- Highly recommended website: www.randi.org
- Randi gives talks at universities: how about inviting Randi instead of yet another psychic or hypnotic?! Randi is just as much fun and infinitely more educational!

The \$1 Million JREF challenge

- Randi has offered \$1 million for anyone who passes a test that ‘all parties agree on’ is a reasonable test for some ‘paranormal or psychic ability’
- Many people have taken this test, and do not do better than chance
 - It seems that many of the people that Randi tests really believe that they have psychic abilities (remember Ray Hyman, the palm reader).
- More famous ‘psychics’, such as John Edward, Sylvia Brown, or James van Praag refuse to take Randi’s test.
- So far, the \$1 million is still in Randi’s safe!

“Why are People drawn to the Irrational?”

- Randi: Because people want to control their lives and solve problems they have in their lives. Something like astrology provides us with a simple formula to do this.
- Indeed, note how many horoscopes skip the step of making predictions, and go straight to advice of what you should do (which has the additional ‘advantage’ of being completely untestable and, thereby, irrefutable!)

Appeals of the Paranormal

- Simple
 - Simple to understand
 - E.g. Position of planets effects personality
 - Simple to apply
 - Just sprinkle some salt and ... voila!
- Exciting
 - Brings good news and hope
 - E.g. faith healing
 - Escape from boring, humdrum, everyday life
 - Ghosts! Aliens! ESP! Cool!

Some Critical Quotes and Notes

- Ray Hyman: “We take something away from them, and they don’t like that”
 - Sets up a dangerous and simplistic split between “skeptics” and “believers”, between “we who know better” and “those poor ignorant souls”. Truth is, we are *all* skeptics the one moment, believers the next, and usually somewhere in between.
- Randi: “I don’t want drugs or alcohol to fuzz the edges of my rationality and powers of observation”
 - Suggests that he can be perfectly rational and have perfect perception. Unfortunately, we are *all* subject and vulnerable to the same basic psychological and social forces and quirks that makes us, from time to time, less than rational.
- Student that was counting on his hands from 1 to 5: “Intellectuals often reject what doesn’t fit their worldview”
 - Good point: we should *all* be more open-minded and critical, including ‘scientists’ and ‘intellectuals’! A simple “That doesn’t fit the scientific worldview” really is not a proper refutation of any claim. If that were true, science could never find better theories!

Randi's Tests

- The best thing about the video is really Randi going around and *testing* these claims, i.e. taking a *critical* look.
- Note that testing can take the form of a complicated controlled experiment, but sometimes just asking a few questions will do the trick (or putting Uri Geller in a situation that Uri Geller does not control!)
- I loved the psychic changing blood pressure and brain waves experiment:
 - Good example of a (somewhat) controlled experiment
 - Possibility of ‘experimenter bias’ in earlier experiments
 - But: Randi himself wasn’t blind either!
 - Bonus: “The measurements are too crude to pick up on effects”. What was the fallacy there?!
- The bottled water experiment was hilarious of course:
 - Good example of making the claim invincible and irrefutable!