Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*

Secret Investigations Wanting Extra Perception


Annie Jacobsen Little, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

Richard W. Bloom

College of Arts and Sciences

College of Security and Intelligence Studies

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University
Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*

To scientific psychologists who knowingly view their discipline in a philosophical context, a book entitled *Phenomena* might be about psychology itself. This is because the classical Greek derivation of *phenomenon* dichotomizes the appearance of something from (its) reality. And much of the discipline of psychology has addressed one or both sides of the dichotomy, often enough the utility and validity of the dichotomy itself.

A brief history of Western philosophy leading to 19th century Western scientific psychology includes Plato’s cave parable from *The Republic* (360 BCE) wherein appearance and reality are contrasted with the latter being privileged. Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) privileges things we intuit in space and time as appearance, not things in themselves independent of ourselves as reality. G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) seems to posit any appearance
as dialectical and historical approximation to a reality constituted as truth based on rationality—although Hegel’s speculation that the appearance of Napoleon Bonaparte entering Jena is the apotheosis of reality may give the reader pause. Franz Brentano differentiates the appearance of mental phenomena as acts of intentional consciousness versus physical phenomena as the reality of objects of perception in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874). And Husserl in *Logical Investigations* (1900) and *Ideas* (1913) attributes phenomenology as the pure description and interpretation of the appearance of lived experience beyond sensation perhaps founded on reality.

But many scientific psychologists do not explicitly conceive nor apply such distinctions and, at best, only imply them in their theories, statistics, methods, and interpretative modes of analysis. In the history of scientific psychology, this has been the case when attending to constructs such as parapsychology, extrasensory perception (ESP), Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
psychokinesis, precognition, psychoenergetic phenomena, remote viewing, retrocausality, and telepathy. Such is certainly the case with investigative reporter Annie Jacobsen and her dramatis personae in *Phenomena: The Secret History of the U.S. Government’s Investigations into Extrasensory Perception and Psychokinesis*. In fact, many of these personae attribute *phenomenal* to parapsychological *phenomena*, so that the latter are not interrogated as to appearance and reality, but ascribed as amazing, sensational, stunning, or exceptionally good. But even as Jacobsen opts for the sensationalistic as will be seen in quotes below, some scientific psychologists—including some of parapsychology’s true believers—have opted for interrogation. These latter attempts should inform any reading of U.S. Government-funded research on parapsychology, even as they are largely unaddressed in Jacobsen’s book.

So back again to 19th century Western scientific psychology, this time to the great polymath William James of Harvard University. Andreas Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
Sommer (2012) in the *History of the Human Sciences* has not only described James’s strong interests in parapsychological research during the period between the writing of *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), but also the strong reaction to these interests by such hallowed psychologists as Hugo Munsterberg, Edward Titchener, G. Stanley Hall, and James McKeen Cattell who—along with James—significantly shaped the early history of scientific psychology.

Not only did philosophy of science issues color this history, but the very notion of psychology as a science was bolstered by psychologists’ attacks on parapsychology as pseudoscience, as much as it was bolstered by psychologists’ embracing statistics, methods, and interpretive analyses from the hugely successful physical sciences of the time. Unlike the conclusions of his hallowed attackers, James’s interests in parapsychology as legitimate research topic may suggest less a cognitive lacuna or some character flaw, but yet another example of a great mind.

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
attempting to avoid confirmation biases supporting and not supporting parapsychological possibilities. These interests would be in contrast to those of scientists with blinkered eyes who, too often, slavishly and uncritically toil away within the paradigms as interpreted by some readers of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). Other great minds partial to parapsychology as legitimate research topic might include Gustav Fechner and his *Zend Avesta* (1906) on divine consciousness and the afterlife, Cary Jung on the occult and synchronicity, and accomplished physicists Wolfgang Pauli and Freeman Dyson—the last focused on epistemologies specific and sensitive to validating parapsychology by addressing the dichotomy of appearance and reality (Choi, 2011). Jacobsen does cite Jung (e.g., 210-211; 377-378; 418-419) and Pauli (pp. 177, 377), but chooses not to share the challenges of parsing appearance and reality inherent to parapsychology.

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
Let’s now turn to the late 1920s, Duke University, and Joseph Banks Rhine, the 20th century’s most famous American psychologist researching parapsychology. His publication history spans 50 years, the vast majority of articles in the *Journal of Parapsychology* which he founded. Other writings are in more (for the time) mainstream psychology journals such as the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology* (Rhine 1934, 1929) and *Science* (Rhine, 1956), as well as in Pratt et al.’s *Extra-Sensory Perception after Sixty Years: A Critical Appraisal of the Research in Extra-Sensory Perception* (1940). (Some psychologist wags might wonder whether the mind-reading horse in Rhine (1929) may be a relative of the widdler-threatenishing horse in Freud’s case history of Hans (1909), of Raskolnikov’s beaten horse in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866), or that of Nietzsche’s flogged horse in Turin precipitating an end-of-life insanity (Kaufmann, 2013)).

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
According to Horn (2009), both Duke’s psychology department chair, the eminent William McDougall, and the Duke president, William Preston Few, initially supported Rhine in the attempt to study whether there was an afterlife—perhaps in a manner less dramatic than the ‘mesmerically induced suspended animation’ described by Edgar Allen Poe in "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1854) ending with “…a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity”. Telepathy was chosen as an initial research topic. From there, Rhine turned to other parapsychological topics such as psychokinesis and was the catalyst in developing research methods including Zener cards (commonly termed ESP cards). Although McDougall and Few both died prematurely and internal funding became less likely, external financial support continued through the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Chester Carlson (the inventor of Xerography), the Office of Naval Research, entities of the U.S. Army, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Some of this is covered by Jacobsen (pp. 41-44).

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
Although best known for his institutional creations—e.g., *Journal of Parapsychology*, Institute for Parapsychology, Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man, and Rhine Research Center—Rhine’s import also lies in a continuous stream of theoretical, statistical, methodological, and analytic innovations that had at least some salutary impact on the challenges of significance testing, power, effect size, and deception in scientific psychological research. Given Rhine’s significance to parapsychology and psychological science, I believe Jacobsen gives him short shrift. But she does have time to relate the U.S. Government’s involvement of remote viewer experts in searching for the kidnapped, tortured, and murdered Marine Lieutenant Colonel William Richard Higgins (pp. 346-350). A more enthralling story—heartbreaking and devoid of analysis.

While the golden age of U.S. Government funding of parapsychological research begins with the end of World War II, let’s move to the 1980s and the report issued by the National Research Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
Council, *Enhancing Human Performance: Issues, Theories, and Techniques* (1988). The report’s committee members include such historical luminaries of scientific psychology as John Swets, Thomas Cook, Michael Posner, and Richard F. Thompson. Chapter 9 of the report covers paranormal phenomena (169-208) and explicitly rejects the “best available evidence” for the “existence and applications” of “ESP”. So, too, for the existence of psychokinesis and remote viewing. It also highlights needs for common research protocols and consensual standards of evidence, more sophisticated analysis of qualitative data and subjective biases, and challenging reification and hypostatization issues with constructs such as remote viewing. It strongly cites “…the discrepancy between lack of scientific evidence and the strength of many individuals’ beliefs in paranormal phenomena”.

But such issues with epistemology, even if they had been publicly and widely disseminated, may not have had much impact on U.S. Government support of parapsychology research. For example, even Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
with two reports minimizing the validity of the polygraph and lie
detection (National Research Council, 2003; Office of Technology
Assessment, 1983), there is significant and continued use of the
polygraph within the U. S. Intelligence Community in mass security
screening and critical incident investigations. This is so even as the
executive summary of the National Research Council report concludes
that “The general quality of the evidence for judging polygraph validity
is relatively low: the substantial majority of the studies most relevant for
this purpose were below the quality level typically needed for funding
by the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health”
(p.2). Jacobsen does not cover the National Research Council report on
enhancing performance, and I wish she had and focused on the disparity
of appearance and reality conveyed by this report contrasted with that
conveyed by her descriptions of U.S. Government funding.

Finally, let’s move to the end of the 20th century and into the 21st with
two controversial articles involving psychologist Daryl Bem (2011,
Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*)
Both advocate not for belief in the phenomena of parapsychology but for following the consequences of scientific psychology’s privileging of specific theories, statistics, methods, and interpretive modes of analysis—even if support for parapsychology is the consequence. In a *Psychological Bulletin* article, Bem & Honorton (1994) conclude that replication rates and effect sizes for the ganzfeld procedure are now sufficient to warrant serious consideration of scientific psychologists. (In a typical ganzfield experiment, an individual wearing headphones through which noise is played relaxes in a comfortable chair. In another room another individual observes a randomly chosen target and tries to mentally send this information to the first individual). The article’s conclusion is less ganzfeld than philosophy of science. “...several statisticians believe that the traditional hypothesis-testing methods used in the behavioral sciences should be abandoned in favor of Bayesian analyses, which take into account a person’s a priori beliefs about the phenomenon under

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
investigation…In the final analysis, however, we suspect that both one’s Bayesian a prioris and one’s reactions to the data are ultimately determined by whether one was more severely punished in childhood for Type I or Type II errors.” Not the stuff of Jacobsen’s breathless accounts such as the professional frustrations, musical preferences (AC/DC, Guns N’Roses), and alleged perception of the USS Stark disaster “…fifty hours before it happened” (p. 344) of remote viewing project officer Paul Smith.

In a Journal of Personality and Social Psychology article (Bem, 2011), precognition and premonition are conceived as the anomalous retroactive influence of some future event on an individual's current responses, whether those responses are conscious or nonconscious, cognitive or affective. Bem asserts that the difficulty for scientific psychologists to believe this appearance might be reality depends on how easy it is to construe the mechanisms that might underlie the reality.

Review of Jacobsen, Phenomena
For example, construing the fundamental laws of both classical and quantum physics as time symmetric would admit to time-forward and time-reversed solutions. And Bem cites Sheehan (2006) that “…it seems untenable to assert that time-reverse causation (retrocausation) cannot occur, even though it temporarily runs counter to the macroscopic arrow of time” (Sheehan, p. vii). This material is not covered by Jacobsen, although she does have time to misinform us that according to Herodotus, Croesus consulted the Oracle of Delphi about whom he should conquer next (as opposed to who would win if he attacked an opponent) (p. 341).

The upshot of all the above is that there’s a big story about phenomena just waiting to be told. But Jacobsen doesn’t tell it. Her story borders on the sensationalistic as to appearance and reality. One tip-off is the text accompanying the photograph of “Lieutenant Colonel John B. Alexander” who’s wearing full colonel rank (and his personal web site refers to him as retired full colonel). He’s referred to as having

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
a “PhD in the study of death” both in the text accompanying the picture and on p. 276 of Jacobsen’s book. The appearance belies a tamer reality. On his personal website, he admits to working on his PhD under psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross of *On Death and Dying* (1969) fame. His focus seems to have been on near-death experiences with applications to children facing life-threatening illnesses and to their families. But maybe a “PhD in death” sells better.

Jacobsen’s book can be a very fast read, something not often the case in a 400-page book. This may be partially due to writing style. In the context of a psychokinesis experiment involving a quark detector and magnetometer, “‘How the fuck am I supposed to influence something I can’t see?’ Swan yelled a little too loudly for the staid environment…For a few minutes he concentrated with all his mental might. Nothing registered on the chart recorder, Puthoff recalls. Zero. Nil” (p. 133). Or in the context of what might be precognition or remote viewing concerning the failed U.S. hostage rescue operation in the Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
Iranian desert during the Carter Administration, “an attacking force of some kind…weird and illogical…very vivid, horrible. Like a bad dream…Big chest, big big gorillas. Great big chest gorilla leading these apes…a huge explosion…a huge fire she couldn’t understand what for’…And then she became overwhelmed and broke down in tears” (p. 238). Or taken from Donald Reagan, “Virtually every major move and decision the Reagans made during my time as White House chief of staff was cleared by a woman in San Francisco who drew up horoscopes to make certain that the planets were in favorable alignment for the enterprise” (p. 335). And from the woman in San Francisco “Not since the days of the Roman emperors—and never in the history of the United States Presidency—has an astrologer played such a significant role in the nation’s affairs of State” (p. 336). And in the context of stories about psychic Uri Geller, we pause for coffee-- “…just the three of us enjoying an evening in Jerusalem, one of the most storied cities in the world…” (p. 412). A psychologist might get some entertainment from Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*
this before getting down to working on the next grant proposal.

However, even lab-bound psychologists would not manifest surprise that
people in political power make decisions based on magical thinking
whether in the worlds of national security, applied scientific grants, or
tenure and promotion committees.

I wish Jacobsen had amped up a story about psychology’s
philosophies of science through its U. S. Government-funded
engagement with parapsychology. The theme might have been that
attempts to emulate the physical sciences led to study of human nature
poverty stricken compared to great plays, poetry, novels, and historical
narratives. And that scientific psychology’s attempts to malign or ignore
parapsychology might betray an unfortunate scientism. By appearance,
by reality, such a phenomenal book remains to be written.
Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*

References

Alexander, J. B.  Home website.

http://www.johnbalexander.com/biography


Brentano, F.  (1874). *Psychology from an empirical standpoint.*

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*


  https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2554/2554-h/2554-h.htm


Hegel, G. W. F. (1807). *Phenomenology of spirit.*

Horgan, J. (July 20, 2012). Brilliant scientists are open-minded about Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*

paranormal stuff, so why not you? *Scientific American*,

[https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check](https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check)


[https://www.sdvigpress.org/dox/108350/108350.pdf](https://www.sdvigpress.org/dox/108350/108350.pdf)

James, W. (1890). *Principles of Psychology*.

[http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/](http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/)

Kant, I. (1781). *The critique of pure reason*.

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*


[https://www.nap.edu/catalog/10420/the-polygraph-and-lie-detection](https://www.nap.edu/catalog/10420/the-polygraph-and-lie-detection)

Review of Jacobsen, *Phenomena*


Plato. (360 BCE). *The Republic*.

[http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html)


[https://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/vldmara.htm](https://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/vldmara.htm)


Psychologist, 14(9), 606-60.8


Science, 123, 11-14

Review of Jacobsen, Phenomena


Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 29(2), 151-171


