

## REFLECTIONS ON “PROJECT ALPHA”: SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENT OR CONJUROR’S ILLUSION?

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### Prologue

A preliminary version of the following paper was sent to about 20 persons, including all the principal actors involved, to obtain their corrections and suggestions. Most responded, and this resulted in numerous changes. I am particularly grateful for the helpful critical commentaries supplied me by Drs. Peter Phillips, Michael Thalbourne, Berthold Schwarz, Walter Uphoff, Ron Westrum, Ray Hyman, and Stanley Krippner, and by Piet Hein Hoebens, Dennis Stillings and George Hansen. Though it is unlikely my end product will be viewed as having satisfied all their criticisms, and only I should be held responsible for the interpretations put forward in this paper, the feedback they gave me on my preliminary draft resulted in some important changes and, I hope, an improved product. Unfortunately, James Randi replied to my invitation to correct any factual errors in the first draft with an angry and vituperative letter. In it, he stated that he would not respond to the questions raised by my article, for to do so would necessitate that he reveal information that would bring further embarrassment to the parapsychologists, and he wished to spare them that. If this is in fact the case, I can only urge him to exonerate himself at such expense to the psi researchers. I hope that upon further reflection, and upon reading this revision of the earlier draft sent to him, Randi might agree that reasoned dialogue is a more appropriate and productive approach to sorting out the many complex issues surrounding Project Alpha. I hope that he will publish a response to my analysis somewhere, and he remains welcome to space in *Zetetic Scholar*.

I fear that there are some who might read this essay and mistakenly conclude that I have sought to attack Randi on a personal level because several of the questions I raise concern his motives. Thus, parts of my analysis might be misconstrued as constituting an improper *ad hominem* attack. That is not my intention, and I believe that any questions I raise about Randi’s motives are clearly linked to appropriate and relevant questions of evidence and argument. Despite our differences, and Randi’s initial hostile reaction to my paper, I continue to believe that Randi has made and can continue to make important positive contributions to psi research.

Those who feel I have been too harsh with Randi will also probably conclude that I have been too kind to those foolish enough to be taken in by Project Alpha. Though I have tried to act as an *honest* broker between viewpoints, and I *aspired* to be objective (recognizing that we seldom can be completely so), I have never claimed to be a *neutral* broker. The ground rules of science are conservative, and in so far as these place the burden of proof on the claimants and require stronger evidence the more extraordinary the claim, they are not neutral. But, we also need to remember, evidence always varies by degree, and inadequate evidence requires a tolerant reply which requests better evidence, not a dogmatic denial that behaves as though *inadequate* evidence were *no* evidence. I very much agree with Mario Bunge, when he stated that “dissent is of the essence of the scientific process, and the occasional pressure to suppress it in the name of the orthodoxy of the day is even more injurious to science than all the forms of pseudoscience

put together” (Bunge, 1980: 46). For some, Alpha has been an attempt to substitute ridicule for argument and evidence. By substituting horselaughs for syllogisms, we act to suppress dissent. It is for this reason that I am often more sharply critical of so-called “skeptics”, with whose “orthodox” conclusions I may in fact largely agree, than I am towards the “maverick” scientists towards whom I have been accused of showing too much tolerance. We can afford to be tolerant towards honest players with maverick ideas if we believe the game of science is a self-correcting system where fair play will lead to correct judgement; but we cannot afford tolerance towards those who play unfairly, especially those players from the orthodox side who start with all the advantages and thus threaten to close the game prematurely. My paper is not intended to end the game; it merely begins a new inning. This essay raises and unpacks what I believe are the proper questions; it is not offered as a set of final answers. Those who contest my observations, interpretations, and/or evaluations, especially those who were involved with Alpha, are invited to participate in the continuing dialog in *Zetetic Scholar*.

Because the reflections which follow are complex, let me outline my analysis. My central concern is to examine Project Alpha on the very terms that Randi has asked us to take it: as a serious sociological experiment. Because the behavioral sciences have long been concerned with ethical issues surrounding research on human subjects, and because Randi’s critics have raised questions about the ethics involved in Alpha, my analysis gives some consideration to such matters. But this essay is primarily a methodological analysis which assesses Alpha as a scientific experiment, not as a rhetorical drama. My essay considers four central questions: (1) Was Project Alpha a competently done scientific experiment? (2) Was Project Alpha ethically carried out in terms of the general values found in scientific practice, especially those which critics of psi research have endorsed in the past? (3) Was Project Alpha objectively and/or adequately reported? And (4) what is the significance of Alpha for our understanding of the process by which the psi debate is being evaluated within science? My analysis begins with a brief description of Alpha and the reactions to it. I go on to consider the context of Alpha, first in terms of historical precedents and then in terms of the challenge to which Randi was responding. I look next at the character of Alpha as a scientific “experiment”. I then consider the actual impact of Alpha on the work at the Mac Lab and done by other psi researchers caught in Alpha’s net. This is followed by consideration of several related episodes which have some implications for our assessment of Alpha: Randi’s claim of a second successful experiment in Project Beta, his getting counter-hoaxed in a manner that revealed some problems with his approach, and two minor instances that raise further questions about Randi’s methods. I then give my general conclusions about Project Alpha. Finally, in an epilogue, I seek to set the record straight about my own involvement with Alpha while it was in progress.

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### The Revelation of Project Alpha

When Washington University’s McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research made it known in 1979 that it was looking for psychics to be tested, young Steve Shaw (18) and Michael Edwards (17) applied and soon became star subjects. During several visits over the next two years they impressed the lab’s director, Peter R. Phillips, and its experimenters with examples of apparent

psychokinesis (PK) and ESP. At a press conference on January 28, 1983, the conjuror James (“The Amazing”) Randi (1983a) revealed that the two wonder workers were part of his “Project Alpha” (soon dubbed the “Shazam Scam” by some of the press) and that the boys were skilled conjurors who had conspired with Randi to fool the researchers. Project Alpha, Randi asserted, demonstrated that the inadequate controls used by parapsychologists against fraud as they pursue what Randi characterized as their “claptrap science”. Randi claimed the boys had bamboozled the parapsychological communities in both the United States and England. Further, he said the boys had been instructed to tell the truth if asked if they were faking, but they simply were never asked. As evidence of success, Randi cited an “article” by Phillips in *Research in Parapsychology*, a supplement to the *Journal of American Psychosomatic Dentistry and Medicine* by Dr. Berthold Schwarz, and several stories about the boys’ powers in *The National Enquirer*. Randi announced the full story would appear in the March issue of *Discover* magazine (Anonymous, 1983a) and also as part of Randi’s TV special, “Magic or Mystery?” to air on February 8th. [The correct title, if I recall, was “Magic or Miracle?”; PRP]. At his *Discover* press conference, Randi also warned parapsychologists that a “Project Beta” was “already underway” which Randi said he hoped would fail because of the lesson learned from his Project Alpha.

The reaction to Randi’s announcement was a mixed one. The most extreme positive reaction was that voiced in *Discover* (Anonymous 1983a) where all parapsychologists were ridiculed, where it was suggested that the American Association for the Advancement of Science should seriously consider expelling the Parapsychological Association from affiliation, and it was concluded that “it seems clear that most of their [the parapsychologists’] experiments are poorly controlled, that their published reports are naive, if not deceitful, and that neither qualifies as science”. [When I discussed this essay with Randi, he said it went further in its generalizations than he would endorse, and I was told by mutual friends that Randi was unhappy with its extremism; but it is noteworthy that Randi never publicly disclaimed *Discover*’s coverage in the form of a published letter to its editor or in his later reports (Randi, 1983d and e). Thus, it was natural that most readers would assume that the *Discover* column reflected Randi’s own views properly, especially since he did “invite” those at his press conference to read the “detailed account” in *Discover*, issued his press release through *Discover*, and publicly thanked *Discover* for “having maintained their silence” during the ongoing experiment, thus indicating the magazine was, to some degree, a collaborator with Randi in his project].

Less extreme, but certainly delighted, was the response of *The Skeptical Inquirer*. Project Alpha was the featured cover story in its Summer 1983 issue. Martin Gardner (1983) wrote of the Alpha hoax as a “landmark in the history of PK research”. Randi published his account of the events in its Summer and Fall issues, and he later presented a further account (in two sessions) at the October 1983 conference on “Science, Skepticism and the Paranormal”, sponsored by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), publisher of *The Skeptical Inquirer*. Though Randi’s project apparently was done on his own and conducted independently of CSICOP, his prominent role in it, the apparent endorsement of his project by its journal, the featured role Alpha was given at CSICOP’s conference, and knowledge of Alpha by some Fellows of CSICOP prior to Randi’s public revelation, have all caused many to perceive Alpha as a CSICOP project. To date, no statement disassociating CSICOP from Alpha has been made to counter these impressions, but I would stress that there is no *formal* connection between Alpha and the CSICOP.

At the other extreme were those “parapsychologists” (e.g. Professor Walter H. Uphoff) and their friends who called “foul” and even continued to insist that some real PK phenomena had occurred in conjunction with (if not directly caused by) Randi’s young accomplices, despite the boys’ denials and Randi’s claim of a thoroughgoing debunking (e.g., Schwarz, 1983b). In addition, Randi was exaggerating—as when he claimed to have “bamboozled the parapsychological communities in both the United States and England” but only offered dubious evidence of that for the U.S. and none for England. He also ignored the last experiments with the boys—reported on at the 1982 Parapsychological Association meetings—where controls seem to have been adequate, and where the boys say they used no trickery, and the results were not indicative of psi (Thalbourne and Shafer, 1983; Shafer 1983; and Shafer, *et al.*, 1983; also, cf., Thalbourne, 1983).

More common was the middle ground taken by some (e.g., Auerbach, 1983; and Hövelmann, in press), including myself, Peter Phillips, and some prominent members of the Parapsychological Association (e.g., Stanley Krippner), who felt that there were potentially constructive aspects to Alpha for parapsychology but that serious ethical issues were involved, also. If Randi had been a psychologist and not a conjuror, some pointed out, he very possibly might have been expelled from the American Psychological Association for what would surely be viewed by many as unethical interference in another scientist’s research program (cf., Broad, 1983). The norms within the psychological community about such matters are far from clear, but had Randi been a psychologist and APA member, sanctions against him could have been sought and perhaps obtained. But Randi is not a professional scientist, and the norms defining proper behavior for him are even less clear. As with many matters, Alpha is not something to be viewed in simple black and white terms. It is a complex matter and by no means a novel one for psychical research and thus should be examined in its historical context for proper understanding.

### Precedents and the Problem of Parsimony

Reading the extreme critics and defenders of Randi, one might get the impression that hoaxes like Randi’s had never taken place in science before. In fact, of course, there have been many hoaxes within science (cf., MacDougall, 1958), and many of them contain strong parallels to Alpha (I do not suggest that there are perfectly comparable cases). For example, a well known case was that of the University of Wurzburg’s Professor Johann B. A. Beringer that began in 1725 (cf., Jahn and Woolf, 1963). Beringer deeply believed that fossils were merely “capricious fabrications by God” probably put in the earth to test man’s faith. To demonstrate his gullibility, some of his students (one of them in the employ of his rival) forged absurd clay tablets with all sorts of inscriptions in ancient languages. They even put the signature of God himself on the fossils. Beringer began to produce a very expensive book on the fossils, and the students told him the truth; but Beringer refused to believe them and went ahead with his book which was then met with laughter and ridicule. An official inquiry was held, and punishment given to the hoaxers who had sought to make Beringer a laughingstock “because he was so arrogant.” In this case, sabotage of a scientific research program was dealt with harshly.

Perhaps the strongest parallel case within early psychical research was the hoax pulled by Richard Hodgson, a leading psychical researcher and an editor of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, and S. J. Davey (cf., Hodgson, 1886–7 and 1892; and Davey, 1887 and 1888). Davey had found he could duplicate some of the effects of the seance room through trickery, and Hodgson set up a series of seances for psychical researchers (including some of the most famous of the period) at which Davey acted as medium and practiced his deceptions. The invited researchers all wrote up their observations describing what they believed to be real spirit activity that could not be produced by trickery. Later, Davey and Hodgson revealed that they had been deceiving everyone as an experiment to test the validity of reported observations. This experiment produced an uproar since the reports were highly embarrassing to those who made them. In many cases reports were made of things not done by Davey or were reported to have occurred in ways that precluded the manner in which he actually did them. Many complained about the fraud, and some insisted that real phenomena had been produced at these seances despite Davey’s disclosure of fraud. Though largely forgotten today, this early study by Hodgson and Davey had a large impact at the time, and many critical researchers considered it extremely important. Not only did it produce serious questions about human testimony, it acted as a de facto control group comparison which reduced the credibility of prior reports made by these same “witnesses” about other seances.

In such cases as the above, the fooled participants felt victimized and considered the fraud sabotage. On the other hand, the perpetrators of the hoaxes felt that what they were doing was for a higher good, to demonstrate incompetence by the researchers. A noble end was the justification for ignoble means. There seems little question that there have been past cases (e.g., the debunking of N-Rays) where such a deceptive approach was productive for science. The general issue of lying to human subjects in psychological research is a serious one within the social and psychological sciences, and this is a complex problem. The problem is made even more complex when we have one set of researchers conducting uninvited experiments on another set of researchers and lying to them as well. (Another important dimension to the problem, one Dr. Michael Thalbourne has brought to my attention, concerns the issue of whether competence should be measured the same way when we are dealing with exploratory research that is clearly defined as informal and of pilot character, as much of the early Mac Lab work seems to have been.)

In dealing with such cases, any judgement of the ethics involved needs to include consideration of the intentions and motives (usually complex and perhaps always incompletely determinable) of those conducting the fraud. Was the fraud done in the hopes of “catching” the researchers doing incompetent work? How objective and disinterested is the party introducing the fraud? If the fraud had been detected by the researchers, would the results have been published and the researchers commended for their competence? Was the goal in using fraud to bring ridicule to the research and perhaps block future research, or was it done with the goal of promoting improved research? Has the introducer of the fraud clearly stated in advance what the possible results would mean? These are the sorts of questions that need to be asked before we can really judge the character of such “experiments”. We might wish to distinguish some episodes as “hoaxes” (meaning they were meant merely as jokes) versus others which we label “frauds” (where more serious results were expected or intended). We should also remember that the key question of whether fraud occurred must also

ask how much occurred and whether there were any validated extraordinary effects that remain unaccounted for by the efforts of the tricksters.

Unfortunately, these questions are often unanswerable about past episodes. For example, it appears that Douglas Blackburn and George Albert Smith (according to Blackburn's 1908 confession) used trickery in 1882 and 1883 to fool many leading psychic researchers into believing that they had powers of telepathy. Although I find the evidence overwhelming that they used deceptions (cf., Hall, 1980), Smith's denial of Blackburn's confessions remains believed by some even today (e.g., Delin, 1972). In such cases, we need to weigh the conflicting evidence and arguments as best we can, but we are usually forced to rely on parsimony for our conclusions.

Parsimony, choosing the simplest adequate explanation, must ultimately act as our criterion for judgement in such cases. Unfortunately, the judgement as to what constitutes a more parsimonious conclusion usually involves subjective elements and a degree of social negotiation (cf., Collins, 1976). If history has shown us anything, it is that disclosing fraud took place is unlikely to convince all those fooled. As with Beringer and those fooled by Davey, some people will simply not accept the revelation of fraud as an adequate explanation. This refusal by a strong advocate to admit that he was fooled (made a fool of?) seems common. An excellent case is that of David Jones who recently displayed his fraudulent perpetual motion machine to some "perpetual motion freaks" (Jones' term). They welcomed him into their brotherhood, and, as Jones described it: "I protested that my machine was a hoax, and that I was a self-confessed charlatan; even so, I was once accused of lying to protect my secret. I fear that many of the poor freaks must have returned to their workshops with renewed determination" (Jones, 1983).

An irony in such cases is that once the defrauders admit to their fraud, the door is open to distrust them entirely. Some proponents will demand that the defrauder prove that he committed the fraud claimed and will not simply accept his word for it. Thus, some scammed by Randi (and it should be emphasized that Professor Phillips is not among them) insist that he has not yet adequately demonstrated how each and every seemingly paranormal effect was produced by deception; and until he does so to their satisfaction, they simply will not accept his claim to successful fraud. On purely logical grounds, theirs is a tenable position in light of the many loose ends involved. But for most of us, the parsimonious conclusion (the one psychologically easier since it seems to make fewer new assumptions about the world) is that we should believe Randi and his associates when they merely tell us they produced all their effects through quite normal means. Given his lack of knowledge about conjuring and his spiritualist views, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle could logically argue that Harry Houdini had actually secretly used paranormal powers of dematerialization to escape from his bonds and that Houdini was lying when he claimed to do it through trickery (Conan Doyle, 1930), but most of us view such an explanation as ludicrous because it strongly violates what we see as the more parsimonious one that Houdini escaped quite normally, just as he claimed, even though we may not fully know his methods. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that without knowledge of his methods (in actual fact, Houdini's methods have long been well known among conjurors), acceptance of Houdini's word that he did mere tricks must be taken on trust; thus, Conan Doyle's position may seem foolish, but it was not irrational.

We need to recognize that those (e.g., Schwarz, 1983b, who conducted research only on Shaw) who today think that Randi has not yet adequately explained the details of Shaw's and/or Edwards's tricks and who continue to believe that real PK took place and that Randi's debunking claims are inadequately supported are neither dunces nor irrational. Those of us who accept Randi's claims as thoroughly discrediting the reports of the boys' PK can not do so on purely rational grounds. We do so because we think our conclusion is the most reasonable under the circumstances, not because our logic and evidence are truly air tight. Until each and every instance of alleged PK by Shaw and Edwards is adequately accounted for as to how it was actually normally produced (not to the researchers fooled—they may never become convinced due to normal factors of human errors of memory and inference—but to the rest of us making a judgement), we may still reasonably take their word that they cheated; but we must recognize that such trust is an act of faith and not one based on purely objective or strictly rational grounds. (Many of the simulation methods are generally available; what some feel is needed is an explanation of the few events which Schwarz and Uphoff still maintain might have been genuine examples of psi.)

If Randi truly expects us to view Alpha as a “serious sociological experiment” (Randi, 1983a) that provides us with disproof, and not merely as a publicity prank intended to discredit claims of PK, he must at some point publish the details of the simulation methods used. Otherwise, how are independent, objective observers (especially those outside the conjuring fraternity who know little about the limits of trickery) to go beyond a merely reasonable or plausible conclusion (agreeing with Randi) to one that is a truly scientific (experimentally established) judgement? None of this is to argue that Randi must reveal his methods. As a conjuror, he has the right to guard professional secrets; he might even be condemned by many fellow conjurors if he chose to reveal all. But it must be openly acknowledged that this is a basic limitation placed on such claims of a conjuror that keep them from equaling a proper scientific claim. Unless Randi is willing to bear the full burden of proof about his claim that all reports of the boys' PK effects can be explained by cheating, his can at best be only a quasi-scientific claim; and those of us who accept the claim should recognize that we do so based on what I believe is a reasonable bias rather than upon purely objective (i.e., exclusively scientific) grounds.

Lest I be accused of “mystery-mongering”, or somehow being an apologist for those who insist that real paranormal effects have occurred even when they can be or have been substantially duplicated by trickery, I must categorically state that such is not my purpose in the above discussion. I only wish to point out that the issue in such matters revolves around questions of parsimony rather than logic *per se*. Many critics apparently believe that duplication through trickery is *sufficient* to discredit a claim that an effect was produced normally. Such duplication by trickery certainly is sufficient to raise serious questions about a paranormal claim, but a question remains a question and not an answer. The burden of proof is upon the claimant in science, and those who make claims of the paranormal must bear that burden, not the critics. But when a critic rejects a claim *not* because the evidence for it is inadequate for the size of the burden it must bear (and parsimony then plays a role) but because he claims to have proven the evidence is the result of trickery, he is himself making a positive claim and that claim, too, needs proof rather than mere assertion. It is reasonable for us not to expect a conjuror to reveal his methods to us, and it is not necessary for

him to do so if he merely wishes to reduce the weight of evidence for some paranormal event about which his duplication through trickery raises serious questions. But, I would contend, it is not mere nit-picking, nor is it apologetics, to remind us that much of our discourse in such matters rests on issues of parsimony and therefore must leave the door slightly ajar for what to many of us would appear to be highly implausible arguments. To close that door would be to block further inquiry, and that a true scientist must never do.

### The Background and the Challenge to Randi

It must be understood that Randi's Project Alpha was in large part his response to a challenge that had been frequently made to him by several parapsychologists. In the past, Randi—as other conjurers before him—usually presented evidence that some alleged psychic effect had not been produced paranormally by himself producing a similar effect through deception. Most critics of psi accepted such a demonstration as a replication of the alleged psychic effect and adopted the parsimonious conclusion that the psychic's effect was probably also a trick. Often, there was controversy over the degree to which the conjuror actually reproduced the same effect under similar conditions. Critics of psi, who usually adopt stringent criteria for replication when proponents claim favorable instances, sometimes accept very loose criteria for replication when the claimed reproduction is discrediting to psi. Thus, Randi's simulation of psychic metal bending on a television show might be accepted as discrediting similar effects reported to have been done under more controlled conditions. But even granting comparable conditions, proponents of psi point out that similar effects do not necessarily imply similar causes. The existence of wigs does not negate the existence of real hair. Randi has always acknowledged that his ability to reproduce psi effects through deception does not prove the effects he duplicates were identically produced; Randi clearly states that his argument that the original effect was probably also produced by fraud is based on parsimony (reasonableness) rather than pure logic. As Randi put it: "I have never claimed—nor could I, as a logical person claim—that my duplication of 'psychic' feats shows that 'psychics' use similar trickery. What it *does* show is that it is more rational to suspect trickery than to adopt the preposterous alternative." (Randi, 1980, p. 3). Note that here Randi says "suspect trickery" rather than "assume trickery". His formally stated position is not so severe as many assert. Nonetheless, Randi's less formal statements frequently sound as though he assumes and even asserts that trickery is the explanation for an alleged paranormal phenomenon; thus, Randi has contributed to the confusion about what he really has been saying. Most psi researchers probably would not take issue with Randi if he consistently stated that he merely suspected trickery as he does in the above formal statement by him. It is clear that Randi goes beyond mere suspicion, for he believes trickery is the most probable explanation, not merely a reasonable conjecture.

Because of this problem, numerous proponents had demanded that Randi come into their laboratories, under their conditions, to demonstrate whether or not he could truly replicate the reported test performances of allegedly real psychics. And when Randi refused that challenge, they viewed this as demonstrating that he was unable to reproduce the phenomena under truly similar conditions. The obvious problem with such a challenge, of course, is that the conjuror has no guarantee that the conditions would truly be similar. In the first place, the actual conditions under which the allegedly real psychic was tested can not be truly duplicated. Those conditions

were necessarily incompletely and perhaps inaccurately reported. (Ray Hyman has pointed out that even the “psychic” who originally performed a feat could not repeat his performance under *exactly* the same conditions, so a proper test would require that both the “psychic” and the conjuror attempt the same feat under conditions to be agreed upon and juried by a panel of proponents, critics and agnostics.) Probably more important, knowing they were dealing with a conjuror, it seems likely that the researchers would be particularly on guard and would not likely seek to be “helpful” as they might be to someone they thought a genuine psychic, one out to advance rather than discredit their work. The atmosphere would be totally different, and that would be very important for anyone seeking to misdirect the researchers.

Knowing this, Randi still tried to live up to the challenge as best he could. Thus, in 1975 he visited the offices of England’s spiritualist newspaper *Psychic News*, got himself introduced as a real psychic named Zwinge (his original family name) and completely fooled them into thinking he was a major new psychic find (Randi, 1982, pp. 186–190). Since he was able to hide his identity, Randi demonstrated that he could deceive some persons supposedly experienced in psychic matters. But, of course, such spiritualists should not be confused with serious laboratory scientists. How then could Randi accept the latter’s challenge while guaranteeing the same conditions that they might give a so-called “psychic” like Ted Serios or Uri Geller? Randi’s answer was Project Alpha.

In an independent analysis of the issues involved, sociologist Trevor J. Pinch (1979) argued that to demonstrate that fraud took place in the original experiment, “the results of the replication must first be *published* as a paranormal claim, just as parapsychologists themselves have done . . . If those results claiming fraud do not get their initial (apparently) paranormal results published, then the critic can say that fraud has not been unequivocally demonstrated because the paranormal interpretation of the results was unconvincing. It is as though a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat without showing us first that the hat was empty. No replication of fraud which meets this condition has yet been reported—at least none which warrants serious scientific attention”. [in a footnote, Pinch indicates he here is making reference to Randi’s episode with *Psychic News*] (Pinch, 1979, p. 336). Though not directly in response to this critique, Randi’s Project Alpha began as an attempt to meet this very problem.

### The Nature of Alpha

Essentially, Randi introduced trickery into an ongoing research enterprise in order to expose publicly what Randi considered to be absence of proper scientific procedures that should have controlled against or discovered cheating. It is important to emphasize the following point: The only thing one might label “fraud” found during Alpha was that put into the situation by Randi (and one can even argue about the use of that term here since Randi’s gain from Alpha was not directly related to any financial loss to Alpha’s victims, he did not intend that they suffer financially, and he did expect to eventually “debrief” them). Alpha was not done to lure the experimenters into fraud or to get them to act dishonestly. Thus, it was *not* a case of entrapment; it was merely one of *sabotage*. But this sabotage was conducted in a “good cause”, to detect and reveal what Randi saw as research incompetence. Therefore, such sabotage was viewed by Randi as excusable.

(I must emphasize that I do not view malice as a necessary part of the definition of sabotage, as those offended by my use of this term have inferred; sabotage can be a defensive act as well as an offensive one, as when a spy sabotages an enemy effort to bomb his homeland.) And, of course, if the researchers' controls had been adequate to stop fraud, Alpha would have failed and (presuming that Randi's association with Alpha had become known) Randi would have been the one discredited once his failure to fool them had been revealed. (In fact, we must remember, too, that Dr. Thalbourne of the Mac Lab argues that the *formal* experiments they conducted *were* fraud proof and that Alpha therefore actually failed, despite Randi's claim to the contrary.)

It seems to me that those who applaud Alpha can be usefully categorized as taking either one of two general views towards Randi's hoax. One is that we are dealing here with a magician, a non-scientist, performing a useful role in debunking what he perceives to be pseudoscientific claims by paranormalists. As such, it is an independent action by a performer, partly taken in response to challenges made to him by antagonists. As such, it would be inappropriate for us to raise serious questions about scientific ethics and methodology. This seems to be the attitude many take towards Alpha. It was merely a prank with a useful side and a prank well done in that it brought ridicule to those who demonstrated their incompetence. (One version of this viewpoint takes the position that Randi's argument was mainly rhetorical and not purely scientific. It is to remind us that when a scientist of good credentials attests to paranormal effects going on in his laboratory, we should take that with a large grain of salt.) Viewed thus, it would fall into the same category as the famous instance of an art show jury that was fooled into bestowing its first prize upon a "work of art" that was actually a painting by an ape which had been entered by some art students. It mocks the pretentious, and many get a good laugh out of it, especially those who think the victims were silly in the first place. If this were all that Randi had intended, it would be difficult to take much issue with Alpha.

We must reject this view of Alpha as just a clever prank, however, since Randi emphatically tells us he did not mean it as a mere joke. He even pointed out in his press announcement (Randi, 1983a) that: "It must be stressed that Project Alpha was designed as a legitimate, serious sociological experiment. It was not intended to belittle or embarrass any persons." It also seems clear that many in the scientific community (at least at *Discover* and at the CSICOP) seem to have accepted this lofty description by Randi of what Alpha is supposed to be. In light of this, Alpha must be evaluated as a serious experiment before we can judge whether it was successful or a failure.

As I noted earlier, there have been past cases where fraud has been used within science to catch incompetents. Perhaps the most publicized recent case of that sort was that in which researchers feigned mental illness in order to get into a mental hospital so that the diagnostic practices of the psychiatrists could be tested (Rosenhan, 1973). These "pseudo-patients" found that once they had been labeled psychotic, they could not establish that they were quite normal. Though there has been much controversy over the ethics involved in the study, many scientists believe that the deceptive means used here were justified by the study's important ends. There are many other parallels. For example, it is not uncommon for those interested in security (as in industry or in intelligence work) to employ third parties to ascertain if they can break through security precautions to test the systems.

It could easily be argued that parapsychologists have some responsibility to similarly test their controls against fraud by actually promoting tests of their precautionary measures by potentially helpful cheats. Parapsychologists must produce adequate controls against error and fraud if they are to convince the generally skeptical scientific elites of the value of their experiments. (I speak here of formal experiments. We must remember that a substantial case—but, in my view, not a clear cut and therefore convincing one—has been made that the early work at the Mac Lab was in fact not of a formal character.) Thus, those who value truth more than they dislike ridicule should—at least to some degree—be grateful for any exposure of inadequate controls by those in their midst. We need to assess Alpha in light of such considerations.

### The Mac Lab and the Rumors

At the 1981 meeting of the Parapsychological Association, Prof. Phillips gave a two part presentation. During the first part, Phillips showed some tapes he had obtained from Randi which demonstrated how metal could be bent through trickery. Those were tapes Randi put together at Phillips' request (it needs to be emphasized that Phillips actively sought Randi's advice prior to this convention, before it was forced upon him as one might infer from Randi's accounts) and included footage from television appearances, including some of those by Uri Geller. Following this first part, Phillips showed us tapes he had of some experiments on PK done at the Mac Lab with Shaw and Edwards. The reaction to Phillips' presentation from his fellow parapsychologists was clearly hostile. Many asked how his tapes really differed from those from Randi. They criticized him for his lack of controls in the experiments. Charles Honorton even stood up and said that this kind of work was setting parapsychology back many years. Randi sat next to me during all this, and he acknowledged that though Phillips had been fooled by the boys, the bulk of those parapsychologists present clearly had not been impressed. Randi even told me he was proud of the parapsychologists for the way they showed their skepticism. Since Randi told many of us at the PA meeting that he was at the convention to write up his impressions for the *Skeptical Inquirer*, I told him I expected to see him write up the matter for that journal saying what he had said to me. As it turned out, Randi never published any column about this convention at all. I have recently been told by correspondents at the Mac Lab that Randi's failure to publish the expected column may have been the result of his prior agreement with Peter Phillips not to write anything about the presentation since it was to be an informal session to which reporters were not being invited.

A strange side event at this convention was that all sorts of rumors started up about what might be going on. The most frequent one I heard was that since the Mac Lab films were so terrible, Randi and Phillips must be collaborating on some sort of experiment at the convention to see if the parapsychologists would fall for such stuff. Given that Randi's films showed methods so similar to those that could have been used by the boys in Phillips' films, it was quite understandable that some of these conjectures started going around.

Finally, it should be mentioned that Randi's complaints about the Mac Lab work center around these early efforts presented at the 1981 PA conference. Professor Phillips correctly points out that

his lab's best work was done after this presentation, work during which they took the critical advice of Randi and fellow parapsychologists and during which no fraud (or very significant psi results) took place. Phillips argues that characterizations of him and his colleagues as "incompetent" might more accurately have described them as "inexperienced but capable of learning as they went along".

### The Reactions to Alpha

Project Alpha's success was soon questioned. Washington University's spokesman quickly pointed out that the Mac Lab had never issued any scientific endorsement of the boys' psychic abilities, that nothing had been published about the boys in a peer-reviewed journal, and he also cited a September 1981 statement from the Mac Lab (Phillips, 1981a and b) that nothing the boys had accomplished could not also be done through normal means. Questions also were raised about the claim that the boys had never been confronted with inquiries as to whether they used trickery. (I always found Randi's charge that the boys were not even asked if they were cheating a bit silly. Even if I suspected Uri Geller of fraud, I would not expect him to admit such to me just because I bothered to ask him. Did Randi bother to ask Geller if he cheated before Randi wrote his book exposing Geller? It is, after all, not the job of interrogation but that of proper experimental controls to eliminate cheating. Besides, just because the boys were instructed by Randi to admit fraud if asked, (a) what reason would the experimenters have had to expect that, and (b) why is Randi so certain the boys obeyed his directive?) Other parapsychologists recalled Randi's presence at the 1981 meeting of the Parapsychological Association when Phillips' research with the boys was sharply criticized, both from the floor and afterwards during informal conversations. They expressed surprise at Randi's apparent insistence (inferred from his media statements as in Anonymous, 1983a) that Phillips's early work was typical or representative of the best in the field.

It soon became apparent that Randi's hoped for big fish—the endorsement of the boys' PK by a major psi researcher who had previously claimed experimental validation of other wonder workers—had gotten away. Randi was only able to show off a couple of minnows he had caught. Perhaps this was in part because Randi had prematurely closed down his "experiment" before a big fish could bite and Randi decided to have a report on Alpha filmed in time to make the deadline for an upcoming TV special on which he was to be featured. On the other hand, the Mac Lab had finished experimenting with Shaw and Edwards some months earlier, and reports that Professor John Hasted (a prime potential target for Alpha) was acting most cautiously because rumors that the boys were fakes had begun to spread.

As I have already emphasized, we must remember that the *only* "fraud" Randi incontrovertibly exposed in parapsychology was that which he placed there himself. Martin Gardner (1983-4b) has referred to Alpha as a case of "entrapment" which Gardner cites as being "the act of catching in a trap or luring someone into a compromising statement or act". In the usual, especially the legal sense, we speak of persons being entrapped when they are lured into some wrongdoing or crime. Though Alpha did reveal much credulity and even gullibility among a few parapsychologists, the facts remain that (1) Randi has not reported that he found any fraud committed by psi experimenters; (2) some Mac Lab researchers may have personally believed in the PK abilities of the

boys, but they never claimed any scientific validation of their abilities and, in fact, issued a major disclaimer to that effect (Phillips, 1981a and b; Bannister, 1983); and (3) Randi saw the negative reactions of the parapsychologists at the 1981 PA convention to the Mac Lab work, so he knew full well that Phillips' experiments were neither typical nor representative of the best work being done by parapsychologists. (To his credit, Randi did indeed expose what many of us would characterize as the gullibility of some parapsychologists, but for this he received praise rather than condemnation from several leading parapsychologists for the useful reminder to all of the need for guarding against tricksters.) It is also important to note that the McDonnell Lab reportedly (Lipowicz, 1983: 18; and Futterman, 1983: 13) spent \$10,000 to host and test Randi's young frauds. A legal action could have been brought against Randi for those costs, but the Mac Lab chose to avoid further expense, time and publicity. To say the least, Project Alpha raises serious questions about the ethics of such an "entrapment" operation done in the name of science.

### Randi's Minnows

The chief victim of Project Alpha was Dr. Berthold Schwarz, a psychiatrist who was thoroughly convinced of the validity of Steve Shaw's psychic powers. I have never met Dr. Schwarz, but from all reports, he is an unusually warm and trusting person. I suspect his great sympathy for people would make him an excellent therapist. Unfortunately, such traits can make one particularly ripe for a charlatan ready to take advantage of one's trust. Dr. Schwarz was an early member of the Parapsychological Association and has published much about psychical research and about UFO's. Nonetheless, he is not an experimentalist and his work is not typical of that done by experimental parapsychologists in the PA.

On the one hand, Dr. Schwarz was thoroughly fooled by Steve Shaw, and he even wrote a monograph (withdrawn prior to official publication) claiming to validate Shaw's abilities. Clearly, his poor observation was demonstrated by Shaw's subsequent debunking revelation. But the fact is that Dr. Schwartz's claims were never endorsed by his peers in the PA, and his writings about Shaw never were published in a peer-reviewed journal. More important, Dr. Schwarz had not previously validated any other youthful metal bender who might now be discredited in light of his mistakes with Shaw. So, this was hardly a major catch for Randi. Note should also be made of the substantial expenses Dr. Schwarz must have incurred in bringing Shaw in for testing, etc. Randi's scam must have cost Schwarz more than pride, so we can hardly be surprised that Schwarz is not grateful to Randi for his "lesson" from Alpha.

Similarly, even if we accept (as I do) that Randi succeeded in discrediting some claims of independent psi researchers like Professor Walter Uphoff—who are not members of the PA, do not represent its standards, and whom Randi today would no longer even call "parapsychologists"—that hardly constitutes the sort of massive indictment of parapsychology that *Discover's* column would suggest. Nor is it the "landmark in psychical research" that *The Skeptical Inquirer* labeled it. In short, Randi's biggest trick with Alpha may have been the illusion whereby he made such a mole-hill appear to be a mountain.

Finally, it should be mentioned that a great many questions have been posed by the rejoinder to

Randi from Dr. Schwarz (1983a and b). For example, Dr. Schwarz first became involved with Shaw because Schwarz hoped that Shaw might be able to use PK to help his seriously ill daughter for whom no orthodox medical cure is available. According to Schwarz, Shaw encouraged both Schwarz and his daughter in Schwarz's quest for a paranormal cure for her otherwise hopeless condition. When I later asked Steve Shaw about these charges (we spoke at the 1983 CSICOP conference where he was a featured speaker), he flatly denied this description of the events that occurred. Knowing Randi's past condemnations of the claims of psychic healers, I wrote to Randi when I first heard about Schwarz's complaint, and asked Randi to confirm or deny Schwarz's allegations. Randi wrote me back saying he refused to reply to such insulting charges. Some of these issues seem to be matters of public record, as when Shaw was taken by Schwarz to the National Institute for Rehabilitation Engineering where Shaw purportedly explicitly spoke about the potential for telekinetic forces for therapy. According to Dr. Schwarz, Shaw's presentation on that occasion is available on tape and corroborates Schwarz's version of the matter. Whatever the facts may be on this issue, there is no reason for us to assume that Randi necessarily always knew exactly what Shaw said to Schwarz. Shaw may not have adhered to Randi's instructions at all times. Since there appears to be objective documentation that might at least partly resolve a dispute that so far has hinged on differences in recollections (and memory is notoriously susceptible to error), we may yet learn what really happened. I hope that Randi will eventually get around to giving us his own version of what may have happened.

### Project Beta and Beyond

Although Project Alpha limited its trap to a small set of psi researcher victims, Randi's announcement at his *Discover* press conference of a Project Beta already in progress was a warning to all. Many researchers reportedly reacted to this announcement with mild paranoia. People within psi research abruptly became suspicious of one another, and all sorts of rumors started flying about where Randi might strike next. I was told that some people had even decided to postpone research projects because they simply did not want to get entangled with Randi. In one instance, as the story came to me, a benefactor from the United States gave a British university around \$5000 most of which was returned because a key researcher there mistakenly feared it might be part of Randi's plot.

Finally, in August of 1983, Randi revealed what he claimed was both the character and the "success of Project Beta". In his published statement on Beta, Randi wrote that "Beta had all along consisted of waiting to see if (a) the parapsychologists would recognize the need for competent outside help from the conjuring profession, and (b) whether they would actually fulfill any announced intention of seeking assistance" (Randi, 1983-4a, p. 103). Since the Parapsychological Association had passed a resolution at its recent convention to invite conjurers (via the major magical organizations) to assist in controlling against deception in experiments, and since Prof. John Beloff had asked Randi for help in setting up controls in a PK experiment, Randi then "happily announced" that Beta was "now terminated and with great success". Randi's announcement included kind words for many, indicated that he would no longer refer to psi researchers who were not members of the Parapsychological Association as "parapsychologists" (an important matter since Randi had in the past always publicly equated serious researchers, most of whom are in the PA, with the often

silly psi seekers that pollute the field), and said he looked “forward to a growing relationship with those who have recognized a genuine move toward a more complete understanding between both camps”. Unfortunately, all this sweetness and light ended with a short paragraph in which Randi let everyone know that he had also started an as yet uncompleted “Project Gamma” which might eventually be revealed. About this new time bomb planted among the psi researchers, Randi has thus far revealed only that it involves a group of scientists and a study begun two years before. So much for Randi’s “growing relationship” and a new spirit of “understanding”.

Randi pointed out that some “jittery parapsychologists” had “jumped to the conclusion that Beta must be of the same nature as Alpha, quavered that I had inhibited further research by this second project. They were quite wrong” (Randi, 1983-4a, p. 102). But were they? The evidence strongly suggests the contrary. Let us recall Randi’s initial announcement of Beta. His statement then was: “If those who were caught in this net (Alpha) will realize their errors and adopt stringent standards of procedure, Project Beta—which is already underway—will fail” (Randi, 1983a). This statement alone should make it clear that Beta was not as later claimed. (1) Beta was supposedly set up to test the reaction of parapsychologists to Alpha, to see if they learned their lesson from Alpha. Yet, here Randi told us Beta was “already underway” *prior* to the revelation of Alpha. (2) Any normal reader of this sentence—and not just a “jittery parapsychologist”—would interpret this to mean that adopting proper controls, presumably in some experiment, would thwart Beta, just as Alpha would have been thwarted if proper controls had been adopted. I believe Beta then *did* refer to another test similar to Alpha, and this would explain the language used. (3) Note that Randi says that stringent controls (such as using the help of a magician) would result in the *failure* of Beta. Yet when the parapsychologists later sought the help of conjurors, Randi said that Beta was a *success*!

There is additional strong evidence that Beta originally meant another trap similar to Alpha. In Randi’s “Advisory Notice Number Two” (which he says was sent out to parapsychologists “48 hours in advance of a formal press announcement” even though it is dated January 28, 1983, the same date [as] on Randi’s press announcement), he closed with the words “caveat legens—Project Beta is already underway . . .” (Randi, 1983a, p. 3). Clearly another warning. Yet, it should be obvious that if the psi researchers had failed to seek the help of magicians, had “failed” Beta, they would have had nothing to be warned about. What would have happened except that Randi might have said he was disappointed that they had not learned their lesson from Alpha. He surely must have meant something else. Additional evidence is to be found in the demonstrable fact that Randi made several earlier references to Beta in letters he wrote to persons who showed me those letters, and here he darkly hinted that particular psi researchers were potentially involved in his Beta trap. Finally, my several early conversations with Randi in which Beta was mentioned clearly left me with the impression that Project Beta was a new trap Randi had set for some experimenters.

What evidence has Randi offered us that Beta was originally what he later claimed it was in August [1983], eight months after he announced its existence? Randi points out that he wrote a description of the nature of Beta to my neutral colleague Piet Hein Hoebens in April of 1983, but that was done several months after he first announced Beta. Critics like Randi frequently complain when parapsychologists fail to post their experimental expectations in advance, raising the suspicion that their confirmed hypotheses might have been created after the results were in.

Yet here is Randi, making a dubious claim about the nature of Beta, and yet expecting us to accept his claim without the simple proof we might have expected of him, i.e. some description of Beta pre-posted with some neutral party. Hoebens would have been quite acceptable to me, but it would have been necessary for Randi to post it with him at [the same time] or before Beta was announced, not several months later. Would Randi let a psi researcher get away with something like this in a purportedly “legitimate, serious experiment”?

What then really happened to Beta? It seems to me that the most parsimonious explanation is that what Randi now calls Project Gamma was probably his original Project Beta. Clearly, Randi tells us, something went wrong with his recently disclosed Project Gamma after it was initiated, and he is uncertain as to whether or not it will ever get completed. This sort of switch is rather a standard magician’s ploy, the use of multiple end points. Since Randi did not initially tell us what Beta was, he could then claim any outcome he wished as representing Beta. Randi knew from me that I had been seeking to get the PA to make liaison with the magical organizations for nearly two years. He was invited by me to be on the PA panel of magicians I arranged. And he knew that many prominent magicians, including those on the panel, were critical of his ethics in regard to Project Alpha (something Randi neglects to mention in his writings). Randi knew all this prior to his letter to Hoebens about Beta. So, I offer you the *conjecture* that Randi may have taken the opportunity to rename his dud Beta project “Gamma” and replace it with a newly defined Project Beta which he could call successful. Randi could thus partially mend his fences and even take some credit for the PA’s new appeal for help from magicians (which, by the way, had been initiated by me quite independently of Alpha and which appeal actually excluded Randi since he is not a member of the conjuring organizations addressed by the PA).

I must emphasize that although I personally believe—based on the arguments and evidence cited above—that Randi pulled a switch to make his Project Beta appear a success, I do not expect all to be convinced by my case which rests mainly on parsimony. I therefore insist that we treat my conjecture about the switch as plausible and likely rather than as proved. On the other hand, we must remember that it is Randi who has put forward the claim for a successful Project Beta, so *he* must bear the burden of proof for that claim if he asserts it as a continuing part of his serious scientific efforts. He may yet present us with arguments and evidence to remove what appear to be obstacles to our acceptance of his assertions, but until he chooses to present such, we must remain skeptical.

### Randi Gets Counter-Hoaxed

Not all psi researchers were put on the defensive by Alpha. Dennis Stillings, director of a Minneapolis group called the Archaeus Project, which puts out a newsletter by that name, was outraged and initiated a retaliatory hoax which started as a small joke but escalated into something more significant. Stillings felt that Randi was trying to reap advantage from lies told to the psi researchers and was, in effect, blaming the victims. Stillings believed that any person could be deceived by lies and that Randi was just as susceptible to such human error as anyone. So, Stillings (1983a) issued a phony, one page, special issue of his group’s newsletter (of which only two copies were mailed out and those to Edwards and Shaw with the expectation that they would show it

to Randi). The ersatz issue contained a short, two paragraph, fraudulent announcement that the Archaeus Project had just been given a “fund of \$217,000 . . . as seed money for a program in PK research and education”. It said the funds were for “grant money to PK investigators, especially those interested in ‘metal bending’ ” and for “developing a program of educating children in the range and nature of parapsychological phenomena”. Finally, it said that “Those applying for grants, as well as those gifted with paranormal abilities” should write to Stillings. Stillings also separately wrote a letter to Shaw telling him that since Shaw was a fraud, he should not apply for any of the money. To stretch a joke even further, Stillings also published a warning “Advisory Notice” (Krueger, 1983)—to parallel Randi’s similar advisory notes—in a previous real issue of his group’s newsletter.

Though Stillings’ original prank struck me as a bit silly (after all, Randi never claimed to be immune to trickery, and conjurors fool one another all the time), what happened next went far beyond Stillings’s expectations and turned the matter into a serious episode. Upon seeing the phony announcement, and apparently without properly checking things out, Randi decided to give one of his annual psi-mocking “Uri Awards” to this receipt of a phony grant. Thus, on April 1, 1983, Randi’s *Discover* news release gave a “Uri” in the funding category: “To the Medtronics Corporation of Minneapolis, who gave \$250,000 to a Mr. Stillings of that city to fund the Archaeus Project, devoted to observing people who bend spoons at parties. Mr. Stillings then offered financial assistance to a prominent young spoon-bender who turned out to be one of the masquerading magicians of Project Alpha—a confessed fake.” In this incredible award statement, Randi managed to falsely identify a major corporation as the funding source (when no source was ever mentioned in the original announcement), escalated the award from \$217,000 to \$250,000, misdescribed the purpose of the phony award, and falsely claimed one of his associates had been offered funds!

Stillings and other foes of Randi, particularly Walter Uphoff, had a field day with Randi’s big blunder. With headlines in psi publications like “ ‘Non-Magician’ Fools Conjuror” (*New Frontiers Center Newsletter*) and “Researcher Fools Randi Into Making Fictional Award” (*Psychic News*), the “Amazing” Randi was portrayed as merely “Amusing”. Randi, however, was apparently not amused. He has thus far not publicly acknowledged his mistake, although he did write an apology to Medtronics and admitted his mistake in private correspondence (including a letter to Stillings which Stillings managed to get Randi to write him by posing as a third party). In fact, when his Uri Award list was reproduced in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, Randi’s award to Medtronics was simply omitted without comment. Although Stillings had only intended his prank to demonstrate the fact that Randi, too, could be fooled, it actually ended up displaying the fact that Randi is capable of gross distortion of facts and in this case, at least, shot from the hip (and here managed to hit his own foot). This naturally might lead some to question Randi’s reporting accuracy in the past and should caution us to look more carefully at the past cries of “foul” that opponents have hurled at him.

### The Soup Thickens

The aftermath of Alpha has been full of much acrimony, and there have been charges of distortion by Randi hurled at him from many quarters, especially by those like Walter Uphoff discussed by Randi in the second part of his article in *The Skeptical Inquirer* (Randi, 1983e). I will

not take up these matters here, for the story is long and not really central to this essay. Interested readers can simply go to *The Skeptical Inquirer* [Box 229 Central Park Station, Buffalo, NY 14215], the *New Frontiers Center Newsletter* [Fellowship Farm; Rt. 1; Oregon, WI 53575], and the *Archaeus Project Newsletter* [800 S.E. 4th St.; Minneapolis, MN 55414] to read the charges being made and can evaluate these matters for themselves. I view those issues as peripheral ones to my concerns here and make no judgements about them now. In justice to Randi, however, it must be noted that the ultimate positive contribution of Alpha may well be found in his debunking efforts in these other areas of what parapsychologist Martin Johnson has called “para-pornography”. Certainly, the claims found in places like *The National Enquirer* about publicized “psychics” like Masuaki Kiyota (championed by Prof. Uphoff and others) and the debunking claims about such people by Randi deserve attention and examination. That is merely outside the scope of this article. Instead, let me turn to two relevant events I learned about only after Alpha had run its course.

Randi’s primary “attack” with Alpha was on the McDonnell Laboratory. Because of the large bequest setting up that lab (\$500,000 over five years), Randi apparently thought this was large operation and an important target. Of course, this grant gave the Mac Lab only an average of \$100,000 per year, and a good portion was presumably taken by Washington University for the overhead costs universities routinely take for administering grants. So, the Mac Lab has never been the best funded psi research operation in this country, as one might misassume from some press reports.

In addition to Randi’s negative “Uri Awards”, he also gives what he terms “Straight Spoon Awards” which commend researchers for their positive contributions. When Randi made his first press announcement about Alpha at *Discover*, in 1983, in which he criticized Prof. Phillips and the Mac Lab for their credulity, he failed to mention something important: On April 1, 1982, less than a year before, Randi had awarded Phillips his “Straight Spoon Award” because Phillips had reconsidered his position about using only loose controls on Shaw and Edwards and decided to re-design his experimental procedures after what Randi called a “less-than-enthusiastic reception for his presentation at the 1981 meetings of the Parapsychological Association” (Randi, 1982; Potash, 1982). One would have thought Randi would mention this award in his writings about Alpha, but that would have made Phillips look less foolish when Alpha was announced. Since Randi told us that Alpha “was not intended to embarrass or belittle any person” (Randi, 1983a), one might have expected him to at least mention this “honor” bestowed by him upon Phillips in the very midst of Alpha.

A second curious matter emerged in a letter sent in to *The Skeptical Inquirer* (Chalmers, 1983-4) calling attention to the “unnoticed irony” in the fact that the journal had earlier published an article (McBurney and Greenberg, 1980) in which Steve Shaw, who had been posing as a real psychic long before Alpha (e.g., cf., Anonymous, 1977; Hazlett, 1979) was purportedly unmasked as a fraud. It seemed that no one had noticed this. The reply to Chalmers’s letter pointing this out stated that Randi claimed that Shaw’s presentation of himself as a genuine psychic was part of Shaw’s “cover” (Frazier, 1983-4), but it seems most surprising that Randi never brought this up in his revelations about Alpha. After all, he could have pointed out how those who endorsed Shaw’s PK powers stupidly overlooked this clear warning to them that Shaw was a phony. It seems

most likely to me (again, I argue from parsimony) that Randi may not have realized this article appeared in his own organization's journal until Alpha was well underway. Randi informed the Mac Lab about this article in late December of 1981, and Phillips replied about it to Randi the next month, pointing out that the alleged debunking was actually of little force since it did not really unmask anything but only proved that Shaw failed to demonstrate psi when controls had been instituted; he had not been caught cheating at all. Perhaps Randi found Phillips' argument on this convincing, or perhaps he did not want to call attention to the fact that Shaw had been presenting himself as a real psychic long before the initiation of Alpha (cf., Anonymous, 1977 and 1978). (The fact that Shaw had been posing as a genuine psychic since 1977, long before he had even met Randi, negates the claim that he was doing so merely as part of his "cover" for Alpha). Otherwise, why did Randi refrain from mentioning this matter when he brought in far less impressive things to demonstrate the supposed credulity of psi researchers? Until Randi gives us a formal and full accounting of Alpha, or makes publicly available the "388 documents" which he said "tells the story of the Project" (Randi, 1983a), this odd episode probably will remain a minor mystery.

### What Can We Conclude?

The Alpha story has not yet ended. We may yet hear more about Project Gamma, and Randi may even be working his way slowly through the Greek alphabet. This essay was not intended to present answers so much as it is meant to explore the facts and raise questions. I may have misevaluated some matters and unintentionally misrepresented others. I sincerely hope that Randi will respond to this essay and correct any factual errors. He is most welcome to space in this journal to correct my analysis. I still believe that Randi frequently acts as an admirable critic. Like the "little girl with the little curl", when Randi is good, he can be "very, very good". On balance, I still believe his presence in the paranormal debate has been healthy. He has done some very effective debunking in the past, and despite what I have conjectured about his motives during the Alpha case, I think Randi believes himself an honest antagonist. Like all of us, Randi is human and is capable of error; and since he aspires to deal simply with complex matters, sometimes his errors have been large. Frankly, I hold Randi far less responsible for his mistakes and zeal than I do those supposedly scientist critics who accept his pronouncements uncritically.

First and foremost, we all must remember that Randi is a professional conjuror. He is not a trained scientist, although he is remarkably well versed in many areas of knowledge. He is, I think, what Ray Hyman (1980) termed a "hit man" brought in by scientists to discredit (rather than disprove) unorthodox and extraordinary claims. It is a great mistake to think that the norms surrounding a conjuror create the same obligations which define the scientists (cf., Collins, 1983). Like his fellow non-scientist debunker Martin Gardner (1981, p. xvi), Randi is often more interested in seeing his opponents defeated by horselaughs than syllogisms. Randi has said that he *hoped* Project Alpha would fail due to the vigilance of the researchers tested. Does anyone seriously believe Randi wanted that to be the result? (As Randi might say, "If you believe that, I have some swamp land I'd like to sell you!") Randi is in effect a kind of vigilante, one outside the normal sanctioning order of science, one who can violate the regular rules in his search for a more

efficient “higher justice”. Thus, he is more like a fabled gunslinger than an official law man; more like Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer than a district attorney constrained by problems like due process and civil liberties. He is not obligated to observe the normal collegial courtesies within the scientific community. If a credentialed parapsychologist discovered a colleague conducting poor or even fraudulent experiments, he would be expected to bring this matter to the attention of the Parapsychological Association or publish his complaints in a peer-refereed journal. A scientist is normally expected first to complain about his peers’ bad work to his colleagues, who are expected to investigate the matter dispassionately, before going directly to the public via the mass media. A normal scientist would be criticized—even if his facts were true—if he first went to a major popular science magazine and held a press conference at which he announced his revelations and told us that details would soon appear on his forthcoming TV show. (Note that Randi would similarly criticize a physical researcher who ran to the media with a popular account of his work before having it published in a proper technical/scientific forum.) But such actions are understandable—and I would argue somewhat excusable—in the case of a professional magician whose livelihood depends not on a tenured university position but upon media publicity. (Since many parapsychologists, even in the universities, do not have tenured positions and are less likely to get it because of the sort of publicity Randi brings to their field, they probably would not agree with me that Randi’s actions have been at all excusable). It is the *job* of a conjurer to get publicity, and Randi is damned good at that job. Even conjurers who have been at odds with Randi (and many, like Walter Gibson, publicly voiced their disapproval of Project Alpha) have expressed admiration for his ability to get great media coverage.

The simple fact is that Randi is behaving much like other conjurers have behaved in the past, including Harry Houdini. It should be expected that he would seek to elevate the status of his activities into that of a noble champion of science against pseudoscience. Would we expect him to say, “Aw shucks, take my scientific efforts with a grain of salt; I’m just a magician”? Given everything involved in the difficult life of a performer, I personally think Randi does remarkably well by the truth *as he sees it*. This in part is because Randi seems really to believe his own rhetoric about his noble fight against the dark forces of irrationality and pseudoscience that threaten Western Civilization. He is not the blind fanatic some suppose, but he is a zealot, and I believe he means well (though G. B. Shaw reminded us all that “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions”).

In my view, the problem is that too many scientists have uncritically accepted Randi not only as their knight but have given him quasi-scientific authority. It is no coincidence that Randi mentions the CSICOP every chance he gets and has it prominently on his stationery; for while plugging his group, he also reminds us of the scientific company that legitimates his activities and elevates them to “scientific inquiry” rather than “publicity seeking”. So, to paraphrase Shakespeare, “The fault, Dear Brutus, is not in this Star but in ourselves.” We simply never should have taken Randi for more than he really is: an excellent magician who can perform a most useful role as an expert witness in the adjudication process of science. We should never have elevated him to the role of a major advocate or lawyer in the court of science, and we certainly should never treat him as either judge or jury. Yet this is what has happened. For example, Randi was designated as the spokesman, rather than as an important expert witness, when he recently was invited to present the case against parapsychology at the 1984 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement

of Science. Many parapsychologists indicated they felt this was rather an insult to parapsychology since they would have expected a scientist to be their critic on such an occasion. We really can not blame Randi for accepting such an “honor”, but we should be critical of those who accept him in such a role. (This has nothing to do with how well Randi performed on that platform.) In short, I blame the scientific community—especially the science publications like *Discover*—and not Randi for the uncritical reactions to his escapades, including Project Alpha. In my view, Randi is just doing his job and doing it well; but, it seems to me, too many otherwise critical scientists and science writers have failed in their jobs because they were so amused by Alpha that they failed to notice the damage to fairness and truth that took place amidst our laughter.

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### Epilogue: On Alpha and Me

Because Martin Gardner (1983 and 1983-4b) has published a number of false statements about my own connection with Alpha, I will take this occasion to set the record straight. I first learned of Alpha in late July of 1981 via a conjuror whom Randi had proudly told about the project. Thus, I did not learn of it from Randi, and I immediately wrote him a letter (which I also sent to several mutual friends in the conjuring fraternity) telling Randi that I had learned of it and had deep misgivings about how he might handle the affair. Randi promptly replied by phone and initially flatly denied the existence of the project. It was only when I told him I had confirmed the story via a mutual conjuror friend (not my original source) that Randi admitted Alpha’s existence and complained that our mutual friend had even confirmed the story for me.

I pointed out to Randi that I was concerned with the likelihood that he might exaggerate the results of his “experiment”, overgeneralize the results to those researchers in parapsychology who were not incompetent, and use the project more as a publicity device that could hurt people than as a constructive effort to help psi researchers do better science. Randi assured me that his intentions were the best, that he actually hoped the researchers would avoid the trap, and expressed his conviction that in the end the parapsychologists themselves would be grateful to him. I was impressed by Randi’s apparent awareness of the deeper issues involved. I had been friendly with Randi for some years, both as a colleague interested in matters paranormal and as a fellow conjuror. I trusted Randi. However, contrary to what Gardner has written (1983-4b), I never gave Randi my word that I would not reveal his hoax. Since Randi did not originally confide in me about the hoax—and even tried to deny it to me at first—I felt under no obligation to Randi. In my letter of July 29, 1981, to Randi about Alpha I wrote: “I do not plan to do anything about all this until at least a week before the PA meetings—if I do anything at all. But I must try to balance the likely good your operation will do against the harm I think it likely to do. The more information I have, the easier any decision I make will be. I am not at all anxious to blow the whistle on this scheme. You seem to have invested much in it and it has—as I have noted—a positive side. But if you can persuade me that there is less to the negative side (or more to the positive side), then I would feel far more comfortable in not warning those I consider the likely innocent victims of your plot.” I told Randi nothing thereafter that would indicate any change in my position on this.

Perhaps the most important factor which induced me not to inform the researchers being hoaxed was that I thought Alpha, if properly done, would likely produce very important results.

Randi expressed his hope that Shaw and Edwards might move beyond the Mac Lab and have their phony PK abilities “validated” by a major British researcher and/or others who had previously published reports about young subjects with similar purported powers. If Randi could actually accomplish this, his accomplices would become a control group against which we could measure the competence of these same researchers who had issued reports claiming the validation of PK powers by others. As such, it seemed to me, Alpha might truly become a “legitimate, serious sociological experiment.” Given Randi’s assurances—which he repeated many times to me over the next year and a half, on one occasion in a small group discussion we had with two other people who knew of his hoax—that he would act responsibly and carefully so that we could all be proud of his effort, I told Randi that I had no plans to communicate the secret of Alpha to those at the Mac Lab.

Though I did not communicate the secret of Alpha to any of Randi’s victims, I did confidentially inform a few key persons, especially several science journalists, including two at *Science* about the matter; and I kept them informed of Alpha’s progress to the limited degree that I was aware of what was happening. Perhaps this was a mistake on my part. I realized that there was the chance that matters might thus leak out, but I felt this small risk had to be taken. So far as I have been able to ascertain, these confidences were kept. I did this mainly to keep Randi from being the only source of information about Alpha when he finally broke the story. I did not want these journalists to receive only Randi’s version of the events. I realized there was the danger that he might turn it into more of a media event than a useful scientific exercise, and I had from the beginning feared that Randi might exaggerate the implications of Alpha for the rest of parapsychology. Since he ended up doing precisely that, I have no regrets about the outcome from my disclosures.

In retrospect, it is easy to say that I might better have done this or that. I remain uncertain about whether I took the wisest course of action. Perhaps I should have immediately informed the Parapsychological Association; perhaps I should have remained entirely silent; or perhaps there were other alternatives I might have taken. Given the complexity of the issues involved and my own conflicting feelings, I took what then seemed to me the most prudent course. Upon reviewing my own actions, I can only assert that I did not act hastily nor did I act with malice. Nothing I did, so far as I have been able to ascertain, hurt anyone or had any significant effect on the program or outcome of Project Alpha. I broke no promises and revealed nothing told to me in confidence. I can only ask that if others judge my actions, they do so based on the actual facts and not on misinformation, misrepresentation or rumor.

## References

[A number of the following items are never referred to in the text, but I have decided to reproduce the whole list as in the original article. I have not checked the references for accuracy, nor have I read all the articles. PRP]

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