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Book Review

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A review of “Voyage to the Rainbow: Reminiscences of a Parapsychologist” by Milan Ryzl (2007)

Milan Ryzl is a Czech biochemist once associated with Rhine's Institute of Parapsychology and best known in our field for his work on using hypnosis to stimulate psi performance (e.g., Ryzl, 1966), his account of psi research in communist countries (e.g., Ryzl, 1968), and his description of a small effect, stable psi performance by Pavel Stepanek (e.g., Ryzl & Pratt, 1963), who seemed to lose his ability later on (Ryzl & Beloff, 1965). Because hypnosis has been linked to psi throughout history (e.g., Dingwall, 1967-68) and there continues to be some, although not unambiguous, theoretical and empirical support for this link (e.g., Cardeña, in press; Tressoldi & Del Petre, 2007), I was especially looking forward to reading this book.

Voyage to the rainbow, a self-published book, is the rambling autobiographical account of Ryzl various life events and, even more so, his opinions about most everything under the Sun, including “human nature,” religion, G. W. Bush, and individuals and traffic police from different nations. When Ryzl writes about parapsychological issues, he is usually more chatty than thorough, even in the second half of the book, which is devoted to his research and thoughts on psi. It is telling that the book lacks references other than those in a few footnotes and that he makes a number of elementary, factual mistakes, such as misunderstanding the meaning of depersonalization and confusing the contemplative despondency known as the “dark night of the soul” with a state of consciousness without an object.

Voyage to the rainbow mostly covers three parapsychological areas, albeit superficially in my view. The first is his experience with fraudulent and potentially real psychics behind the Iron Curtain, including one who apparently provided him with important personal information. The second concerns what he considers one of his main discoveries, “the recognition of the relationship between ESP and religions (p. 167).” Using quotation from Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and other traditions, he proposes that ESP refers to an immaterial aspect of creation, which he equates with God. Although I agree with some of the passages he quotes, they are not discussed in depth, as compared with a book like Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* (1990/1945). He bases his conclusions partly in research in which he asked talented participants to “use their ESP to obtain information about various topics of religious significance (p. 243). He mentions that participants asked these questions were studied independently from each other, but shows no awareness about the potential suggestive impact of his involvement in the hypnotic process.

The third parapsychology topic revolves around the association of psi and hypnosis. Ryzl’s training on hypnosis was mostly or totally from buying popular books, as far as I could tell, and it shows. He states, for instance, that hypnosis is “a state similar to sleep (p. 187)”, which is not the case, and he does not show any awareness that a hypnotic effect depends on hypnotizability, a trait-like ability to respond to hypnotic suggestions and have anomalous experiences, which manifests important individual differences (e.g., Cardeña et al., 2007). Ryzl’s definition of the hypnotic “trance” at time sounds like strong absorption, at times like “consciousness without an object,” but at no point did I find evidence that he had reviewed the literature on the area. Unfortunately he also seems to be unaware of much research in psi research other than the older literature and Stanford’s PMIR theory (e.g., 1977), and he makes claims that must be qualified, for instance that psi-missing occurs when the participant is in an emotionally negative state (while there may be a relationship in this regard, it is far from robust, and may interact with other factors such as the sheep-goat effect, which he does not address). Also, I found his

statements about how hypnosis can provide the *via regia* to the development of psi abilities overblown, unless he has evidence (which was not evident in the book) that not only Stepanek, but that he himself and many others can achieve strong and demonstrable psi abilities just by using hypnosis. The cumulative literature on psi makes difficult to escape the conclusion that there are striking individual differences in people's abilities to evidence psi, at least in controlled experiments, although it is also clear that we understand very little about what those abilities are.

I did find, however, one chapter that I think is worth rescuing from the book, the appendix on "mental impregnation." In it, Ryzl proposes that psychical attention or intention can "impregnate" matter with information. For instance, he reviews his data on his participant Stepanek, who tended to give the same description as he had previously given (either green or white) to a card that was placed in different envelopes at different times. Unless there was some kind of physical leak, this effect indeed seems difficult to explain in ordinary terms and is consistent with Roll's (1982) theory on hauntings and similar phenomena.

As for the sections on Ryzl's views about the world, they often display various prejudices, some of which I found quite distasteful. For instance, his opinion that poverty in major cities can be explained by lazy country people coming to the city to beg instead of work, or his conclusion that a Brazilian street boy "is winning over the system (p. 137)" when he got some bread from Ryzl's table. He should live in the shoes (an obvious metaphor because probably the kid is barefoot) of that kid for 24 hours to see whether he is beating any system! I felt also that the section on Ryzl's judgment about and legal entanglements with various members of his family was unfortunate and completely gratuitous. Although I do not know him or his family, I suspect his claims that he has "*always* [my emphasis] tried responsibly to do good, and to make other people happy (p. 200)." None of us is that perfect, psi or no psi... In sum, I do not recommend embarking on Milan Ryzl's voyage...

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