# Charles Honorton's Legacy to Parapsychology

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Charles Honorton was one of parapsychology's foremost researchers. He died November 4, 1992, of a heart attack at his home in Edinburgh, leaving the small world of parapsychology in shock. Although many of us knew that he had had heart problems for some time, the loss of an active researcher in the midst of his career and at the age of only 46 must always be a shock. To parapsychology it was doubly so because of the unique importance of his work.

I wanted to write something in his memory, not only because I knew him for many years but because his loss will have an enormous impact on parapsychology. And I am not at all sure just what that impact will be.

Chuck and I had not, to say the least, seen eye to eye on the paranormal. I remember with affection a somewhat drunken argument at a parapsychology convention at Tufts University in which we were both more or less reduced to tears and hopeless hugs by our complete failure to understand how the other could go on believing what they did. At that time, in 1985, he was director of the Psychophysical Research Laboratories, in Princeton, New Jersey. In 1989 the funding dried up (as has happened to so many parapsychology laboratories), and he moved to Edinburgh University to work with Bob Morris and his team at the Koestler Chair. After his arrival there, he and I had many extended phone conversations and learned that, whatever our differences, we shared a determination to try to understand paranormal claims and an unwillingness to accept shoddy research or shoddy criticism. An Italian skeptics' journal recently asked three well-known parapsychol-

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ogists and three leading skeptics to write about parapsychology's future. Chuck and I were asked to comment on the contributions from opposing points of view. Although I have not yet seen his response, I have a sneaking feeling that his and mine will have more in common than in opposition.

But that is enough of my personal memories of Chuck; more important is to explain why his death will make such a difference.

It is often said that in parapsychology fads come every decade or so and then go away: like S. G. Soal's work in the fifties and dream-telepathy in the sixties. The supposed fad of the 1970s was the ganzfeld. But it has not gone away yet.

It was in 1974 that Honorton and Harper published the first paper describing the psi-ganzfeld technique in which the subject, or receiver, relaxes on a comfortable chair or bed, has halved ping-pong balls over the eyes to produce a uniform visual field (the ganzfeld) and white noise or repetitive sounds fed through headphones. His hypothesis was that this reduction in patterned sensory input would encourage free-flowing imagery and the incorporation of extrasensory perception (ESP), and that it would be far easier to study than other "psi-conducive states," such as meditation and dreaming. The significant results encouraged many other parapsychologists to replicate or extend the method.

By 1982, when the Parapsychological Association teamed up with the Society for Psychical Research in a centenary conference, the "Ganzfeld Debate" was under way. Ray Hyman had taken on the task of evaluating the entire database of some 40 ganzfeld experiments. He argued that the claimed 55-percent success rate was a gross overestimate, that multiple testing pushed the true significance level way above the assumed .05, and that many studies suffered from procedural flaws. He subjected the data to meta-analysis and showed that some flaws positively correlated with effect size—in other words, the flaws were probably responsible for the effect and the data were too weak to support any claims about psi (Hyman 1985).

In response, Honorton (1985) used a statistical technique to eliminate the problem of multiple analysis. He showed that the successful results did not depend on any one investigator and performed his own meta-analysis, which showed no relationship between flaws and study outcome. The whole debate was published in 1985 and was a turning point in parapsychology. Although people remained divided over the substantive issue—Is there ESP in the ganzfeld or not?—there was general agreement that the debate was extremely useful and that both Hyman and Honorton were to be congratulated for their persistence and courage in working together and seeing it through to a joint statement (Hyman and Honorton 1986). Perhaps most important was that the debate brought together skeptics and parapsychologists to discuss the issues. I can recall several conferences at which they tried to agree on just what would count as a flawless experiment. Realizing, of course, that such an ideal is unattainable, it was still possible to reach some general agreement. It was then that Chuck designed a completely automated ganzfeld testing procedure.

Over the next few years Honorton and his team at Princeton worked with their system and in 1990 published the results of 11 experiments with 241 volunteer subjects and 355 ganzfeld sessions (Honorton et al. 1990). I can only imagine the amount of time and work involved in this from my own

experience with a simple ganzfeld experiment with just 20 trials. The results of these automated studies were staggeringly significant. My own impression from reading the paper many times was that the experiments were very well designed and the results certainly not due to chance. If they were due to something other than psi it was not obvious what it was. In other words, these experiments stood out from all the mass of failed, barely significant, or obviously flawed studies.

Why were they successful? That is the crux of the matter and one of the reasons Chuck Honorton will be so sorely missed. Everyone interested in parapsychology, whether believer, disbeliever, or skeptic, ought to take these results seriously. They cannot be dismissed lightly. They conform to most, if not all, of the requirements laid down by the skeptics, and the results were highly significant, convincing many of the reality of laboratory psi. Certainly the Edinburgh group took them seriously and were delighted that Chuck was able to come to Scotland to set up the same automated system in a different place and with different colleagues. They, like the rest of us, wanted to know whether the same results would be obtained.

Now, of course, we shall never know. The Edinburgh team is determined to carry on Chuck's good work, but what will they find? If they are as successful as his Princeton team was, then there will be something to work with, and we may yet get to the bottom of the mystery—whether the solution is a psychic or a normal one. But if they fail I suspect we shall never know why Chuck Honorton seemed to have the magic touch when it came to producing psi.

Was it his personality? Was it something he brought to the experimental design? Was his hypothesis about sensory noise reduction actually correct? I am very, very sorry that we are not to see Chuck himself repeat these experiments over here and give us the chance to find out. His death was a blow to parapsychology and he will be greatly missed.

## *References*


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