

## Paranormal Pickles: How Do We Know When It's Paranormal?

Excerpt from *God and the Paranormal*  
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*“All that glisters is not gold—  
Often have you heard that told.  
Many a man his life hath sold  
But my outside to behold.”*

William Shakespeare

*“The skeptics have to be right every day, but the believers  
only have to be right once.”* Nick Pope<sup>1</sup>

Modern information collecting has created a monster for paranormal researchers. The data are vast for most paranormal phenomena. For example, one UFO research group claims to have investigated 120,000 cases over the past fifty years<sup>2</sup>. When faced with the mountains of information the squeamish usually shelve the topic. Thus, my cucumber metaphor...

Years ago, my family grew cucumbers for a large pickle company. It was a small patch, but it kept us quite busy through much of the summer. For those unfamiliar with the art of cucumber cultivation, the pre-pickle fruit is the same color as the leafy vines, leaving them well-camouflaged during harvest. As hard as one might try to pick each cucumber at its peak (smallish, straight, and succulent), each pickle-picking reveals numerous “escapees” from previous days.

Cucumbers grow very quickly in the summer heat, and a fingerling missed one day could be almost watermelon-size two days later. It was amazing how many humongous or distorted fruits appeared in the daily harvest. The “monsters” had no market value, so they became chicken feed. Only a small proportion of the harvest was the small, quintessential, *pickles de résistance* that the picklers wanted. We watched anxiously as the sorting machine culled out the different sizes and shapes into the appropriate bins. Sadly, the pickup pile of potential pickles typically produced only a paltry portion of premium pickles for profit. Hence the *Pickle Principle*...<sup>3</sup>

As previously mentioned, most alleged paranormal data are very large collections of *everything*. And by *everything*, I mean *everything*... Information that ranges from stupid to plausible... Obvious to unexplainable... Personal to widespread... Anecdotal to multi-documented... This is a major reason for the broad range of opinions regarding the phenomenal. If someone wants to show that ghosts are hoaxes, there are plenty of data points that will support that hypothesis. If another claims that only insane people see ghosts, there's a pile of good evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Pope, former UK MoD Investigator, [www.nickpope.com](http://www.nickpope.com).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Brazil “Irvine-based UFO Group Marks 50 Years of Watching the Skies,” [www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com), June 26, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Similar to the composition fallacy.

for that as well. For the skeptic, the scientist, or the true seeker, the “premium” paranormal scenario would be 1) well-documented, 2) from a reliable source, 3) researchable to some extent, and 4) in opposition to at least one physical law. Yet keep in mind, as much as we would like to find our pickles neatly sorted and canned—it won’t happen. *If* the authentic exists at all, it will be buried in a truckload of distracting “problematic pickles.”

To be clear, I’m not suggesting that a small number of genuine supernatural phenomena *will* be hiding in every data set. I could be wrong, but I’ll go out on a limb and say that out of all the cat owners who say their cat speaks to them in whole sentences, *not one of them* is experiencing something paranormal. (There’s probably a more psychological explanation.) *All the available data might support natural explanations.*

For our purposes, I propose three general classifications for miracles and other paranormal phenomena:

1. Mistaken identification.
2. Directed human activity.
3. Observationally accurate event.

Humans are quite prone to make *mistaken identifications*, especially in the midst of an unusual situation. Our brains purposely focus on some stimuli and ignore others. Part of the problem in discerning the paranormal is that it essentially is “alongside” the normal. It isn’t totally *opposite* or *un-normal*. There may be at least some element of reality associated with it, thus, something natural may be mistaken for something unnatural.

*Directed human activity* includes deliberate deception for a variety of reasons such as profit, power, malice, entertainment, or national security. We certainly don’t have to look far for examples of trickery and collusion being passed off as paranormal.

*Observationally accurate* implies that the phenomenon isn’t explained by one of the first two categories, although a supernatural cause isn’t *necessarily* being asserted. For example, in the case of a supposed miracle, this simply means that the observation corresponds in reality to the perception: “I saw a paraplegic person take up his bed and walk.” The observer actually observed (not necessarily interpreted) accurately. In a poltergeist account, the report may say: “I saw a cup levitate over the tabletop for several seconds then dropped and broke.” Although this would be a very odd incident, loaded with all kinds of paranormal hypotheses, the observation itself doesn’t cloak a cause or motive. Often, phenomena are reassigned as more information is gathered. For instance, what appears at first to be observationally accurate may be determined a mistaken identification or vice versa.

### **The PICKLE PRINCIPLE**

In a collection of alleged paranormal data, most or all the incidents might be explained by natural means, however, that doesn’t preclude the fact that some incidents in the collection *could* be paranormal.