

The One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge

The One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge was a prize offered by the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) ‘to any person who demonstrates any psychic, supernatural, or paranormal ability under satisfactory observation’.¹ JREF claimed that over 1,000 people applied for the Challenge. However, none succeeded and the offer was withdrawn in 2015.

History

The One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge belongs to a long history of prizes offered for demonstrations of paranormal ability under controlled conditions. In January 1923, the magazine *Scientific American* issued a challenge with two US,500 offers: (1), for the first authentic spirit photograph made under test conditions, and (2), for the first psychic to produce a ‘visible psychic manifestation’.² In the 1930s, magazine publisher Hugo Gernsback (‘the father of science fiction’) offered multiple prizes for demonstration of correct astrological predictions, mediumistic abilities, and perpetual motion machines,³ and in the 1960s Indian academic Abraham Koveer offered 100,000 Sri Lankan rupees ‘to any one from any part of the world who can demonstrate supernatural or miraculous powers under fool-proof and fraud-proof conditions’.⁴

[James Randi](#) first instituted his own challenge in 1964, after a parapsychologist challenged him during a live radio panel discussion to ‘put [his] money where [his] mouth is’; Randi offered \$US1,000 of his own money to anyone who could offer scientific proof of the paranormal.⁵ The prize value was subsequently lifted to ,000, and in 1989 became 0,000 for a short period when Lexington Broadcasting added ,000 to Randi’s existing reward for a show they and Randi were working on, *Exploring Psychic Powers - Live!* In 1996, the prize became ,000,000 when pioneering Internet entrepreneur Rick Adams offered to fund the Challenge.⁶

In later years a number of announcements were made regarding changes to the Challenge. In January 2007, JREF modified the eligibility requirements – due to being ‘swamped with frivolous claims’ and being accused of going after ‘easy targets’ – saying that from 1 April 2007, applicants would be required to have a media profile, as well as an endorsement of their abilities ‘from an appropriately-qualified academic’. JREF also planned to take a pro-active approach by directly challenging ‘well-known persons in the field’, including [Uri Geller](#), James Van Praagh, Sylvia Browne, and John Edward – and giving them six months to respond, during which time JREF would ‘heavily publicize the fact that such a challenge has been issued’.⁷

The following year, in 2008, JREF announced that on 6 March 2010, after twelve years, the Million Dollar Challenge would be discontinued to allow them to use the million dollars ‘more productively’, noting that ‘the hundreds of poorly-constructed applications, and the endless hours of phone, e-mail, and in-person discussions

we've had to suffer through, will be things of the past'.⁸ This announcement seemed to run counter to one of the rules of the Challenge: that the prize would continue on (even beyond the death of Randi) until it was awarded.⁹ However, a year before the discontinuation was scheduled to take effect JREF rescinded the decision, saying in a message on their website on 29 July 2009 that the challenge would continue.¹⁰

In 2011, JREF announced a complete change of approach with the Challenge, saying that they would now instead be setting 'a lower bar for entry' for future applicants. In the changes to eligibility in 2007, applicants had been required to present a letter from an academic supporting their application, along with press clippings that reported on their talents. From this point, however, only one of those stipulations was seen as a requirement: 'demonstrating that somewhere, at some point in time, some independent person has taken their claim seriously', or otherwise by submitting a video that demonstrated their ability.¹¹

Following Randi's retirement in 2015 and prior to his death in 2020, the Challenge was finally terminated. The board of the JREF declared its intention to use the money for awarding grants totalling approximately 0,000 per year.¹²

Challenge Details

The rules and guidelines for the One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge were freely available on the JREF website, and were modified at various times in order to reflect the current approach of the Foundation.

The guidelines note that the Million Dollar Challenge was only open to paranormal claims that were 'amenable to scientific testing' – purely religious or spiritual claims were not accepted 'because they are, for the most part, untestable'.¹³ Also, any applications involving a claim that might cause injury or death were rejected on both 'legal and humanitarian' grounds.

The JREF guidelines note that the Foundation did not dictate the terms of the Challenge, with the testing procedure instead being a 'negotiation' between the JREF and each participant. If that negotiation resulted in a deadlock, then the application process would be terminated with neither party being blamed.¹⁴

The rules stated that applicants for the Challenge must agree that 'all materials and peripheral properties (photographic, recorded, written, etc.) gathered as a result of the test procedure, the protocol, and the actual testing, may be used freely by JREF'. Applicants were also required to waive all claims against Randi, JREF or any of its officers, excepting any claim that might be necessary to enforce payment of the prize in the event of winning.¹⁵

Notable Applicants

Dick Bierman

Dick Bierman of the University of Amsterdam approached James Randi about the Million Dollar Challenge in late 1998, on the basis of his successes replicating

presentiment experiments carried out by parapsychologist Dean Radin (in which human reactions seem to occur marginally before an event occurs). Randi and Bierman worked out a proposal for an experiment that would last about a year. According to Bierman, at that point 'Randi mentioned that before proceeding he had to submit this preliminary proposal to his scientific board or committee. And basically that was the end of it. I have no idea where the process was obstructed but I must confess that I was glad that I could devote myself purely to science rather than having to deal with the skeptics and the associated media hypes'.[16](#)

Sylvia Browne

In 2001 Sylvia Browne, a high-profile 'psychic', was challenged to be tested by JREF on Larry King Live, which she agreed to [live on air](#). For many years afterwards, JREF ran a 'Sylvia Browne Clock' on their website, which counted the number of days that had passed since Browne had agreed to take the Million Dollar Challenge. Browne passed away in November 2013, without ever submitting herself for testing by the JREF.

Derek Ogilvie

JREF tested 'baby mind-reader' Derek Ogilvie in May 2008 as part of the 'Extraordinary People' series on Channel 5 in the United Kingdom.[17](#) For the test, carried out in a sound studio at the University of Miami, babies picked a numbered ball out of a bag, which signified a certain object that the baby was then given the chance to hold briefly. Ogilvie, isolated in a sound-proof room, had to announce what the object was. Ogilvie failed the test, with his results conforming to that expected by chance.

Patricia Putt

On 6 May 2009, self-proclaimed psychic Patricia Putt took the preliminary test under the supervision of Professors [Richard Wiseman](#) and [Christopher French](#) in the United Kingdom, on behalf of JREF. Putt was asked to carry out readings for ten strangers, each of whom were then presented with all of the readings and requested to select the one that best described them. None of the strangers picked their actual reading, giving Putt a score of zero out of ten – an obvious fail.[18](#)

Beyond Belief Segment

In August 2011, ABC's *Beyond Belief* programme featured a segment in which five individuals were tested by JREF officials: a Tarot reader, a palm reader, and three mediums[19](#) (although only one of the mediums' tests was shown on air. The preliminary test was waived for the show, with all challengers being eligible to directly win the ,000,000 if they passed. Notably however, the benchmarks set by JREF as the pass level were extraordinarily high – parapsychologist [Dean Radin](#) has pointed out that one of the tests required beating odds against chance of 29.6 million to 1.[20](#) All the challengers failed.

Challenge Tests at JREF's Annual Conference

In recent years JREF has carried out a number of preliminary tests for the Million Dollar Challenge live on-stage during their annual conference, The Amazing Meeting (TAM). In 2012 the applicant was Andrew Needles, creator of the 'Dynactiv SR wristband'; in 2013 Algerian remote-viewer Brahim Addoun took part via phone; in 2014 Qigong practitioner Fei Wang attempted the Challenge. All failed their preliminary tests.***No source

Criticisms and Controversy

Extreme p -value Requirement

Though JREF has stated that 'the tests are designed to be easy for any genuine psychic to pass',²¹ in reality the Challenge sets a very high bar for success. To win the million dollars any applicant must first successfully complete a preliminary test, which has in the past required a p -value (the probability of getting the experimental results when the null hypothesis is true; that is, by chance) of approximately 0.001 – the equivalent of beating 1000 to 1 odds – before progressing to the challenge proper, which has a much higher p -value requirement: approximately 0.000001 (odds of 1 million to 1). Though such high p -value requirements are entirely justified in terms of protecting the huge prize against a lucky guess, the p -value may not represent a fair scientific appraisal of an applicant's performance. If an applicant's test results were at a level equivalent to chance guessing at odds of 800,000 to 1 it would likely indicate to any fair-minded judge that it is extremely likely that something of interest is occurring. But in the Million Dollar Challenge, such a performance would be deemed a failure.²²

In response to criticism on this point, James Randi announced in 2008 that, after consulting with JREF's statistician, he would lower the bar to 100 to 1 odds for the preliminary test, and 100,000 to 1 for the main test (which, combined, would still require an applicant to beat 1,000,000 to 1 odds to win by chance alone).²³ However, subsequent preliminary tests do not appear to have incorporated this change – for instance, in the 2013 live Challenge at The Amazing Meeting, the odds of passing the test by chance, as announced by Chip Denman of the JREF, were 1 in 1,140. The test can be viewed [here](#).

Lack of Scientific Significance

The one-off nature and high p -value requirements of most tests also undermine the Challenge's scientific credibility. Noted sceptic [Ray Hyman](#) has commented that even if an applicant wins a sceptics' prize such as the Million Dollar Challenge, it will not convince sceptics that the phenomenon is genuine: 'Scientists don't settle issues with a single test, so even if someone does win a big cash prize in a demonstration, this isn't going to convince anyone. Proof in science happens through replication, not through single experiments.'²⁴ Steven Novella, a JREF Senior Fellow, has openly stated that 'the purpose of the challenge is not to design and run scientific experiments, and it is not to scientifically prove or disprove the existence of the paranormal or any particular supernatural phenomenon.'²⁵ Magician Jamy Ian Swiss, an advisor to JREF on the Challenge, has echoed that viewpoint, noting in an interview 'we never say that the million dollar challenge is

scientific research. It's not. It's a test that's designed to scientific protocols, but we're not doing science because we don't have enough trials ... if and when someone passed the test and took the million, we're not stamping them officially psychic at that point. We're saying that day, they passed the test, and it's for others to determine what the significance of that is.' The interview can be viewed [here](#).

Faulty Generalisation

Despite the Challenge's lack of scientific authority, people have sometimes used the fact that the million dollars remains unclaimed as a refutation of all paranormal claims. For example, in a recent scientific paper disputing the precognition experiments of psychologist [Daryl Bem](#), the authors openly stated 'There is no real-life evidence that people can feel the future (e.g., nobody has ever collected the ,000,000 available for anybody who can demonstrate paranormal performance under controlled conditions, etc).'²⁶ Similarly, in an interview neuroscientist and rationalist Sam Harris noted that it seems 'fishy' that if paranormal abilities are real, no person has just come forward and demonstrated them to James Randi to win the million dollars.²⁷ Though JREF officials have at times distanced themselves from such fallacies, they have sometimes helped to propagate them. For example, on JREF's website, president DJ Grothe is quoted as saying the Challenge 'is a tool that people everywhere can use to evaluate paranormal and pseudoscientific claims, by asking, "if this claim were true, why hasn't someone proven it and won the million?"' ²⁸

Did the Money Exist?

Doubts have been expressed regarding the existence of the million dollar prize. In response, Randi and JREF issued financial statements as proof.²⁹ They also noted that if a claimant won the prize, it had to be awarded within ten days, 'as per the Challenge rules and the legally binding contract entered into when the application was signed'. If they failed to do so, JREF would be open to a lawsuit for breach of contract. Given the available evidence, there seems little reason to doubt that the prize existed and would have been paid out to anyone who managed to pass the Challenge.

Lack of Trust

The Challenge may be compromised by the lack of trust in James Randi's integrity that many people in the paranormal field feel as a result of some of Randi's past actions. Researcher [Rupert Sheldrake](#) has said, 'I don't take the prize seriously, and above all I don't trust Randi since I've found him to be dishonest', while [Gary Schwartz](#) has explained how 'James Randi has a history of engaging in the twisting of the truth'.³⁰ Randi has confirmed some of these accusations, and admitted to lying on occasion when engaging with opponents.³¹

In the October 1981 issue of *Fate*, astronomer and sceptic Dennis Rawlins revealed that James Randi had told him, with regard to the possibility that someone might one day win his challenge, 'I always have an out.'³² Randi has rebutted the criticism as a case of selective quoting, saying that his full statement to Rawlins was 'Concerning the challenge, I always have an out: I'm right!'³³

Ethical Concerns

Offers a large amount of money for demonstration of paranormal abilities might be a tempting proposition for self-deluded or psychiatrically unbalanced people. Given that the Challenge testing was often of a highly visible nature and used for publicity purposes by JREF, this could have raised ethical questions about the Foundation preying on the vulnerable for the purposes of self-promotion. JREF officials were cognisant of this at times: discussing the more stringent eligibility requirements instituted in 2007, JREF's Jeff Wagg said of this problem: 'If we get them to go to a challenge and they lose, we're exposing someone who had serious mental illness. That doesn't do us any good, and it doesn't do them any good.'³⁴ However, the reversal in policy to 'a lower bar for entry' in 2011 seemed to dismiss this concern.

Greg Taylor

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Endnotes

Footnotes

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