

Chapter 6  
**Some Thoughts on  
Parapsychology and Religion**

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One common theme in the world's great religions is, to put it roughly and colloquially: you can't fool God. That is, if you do something reprehensible, you might fool others into thinking that your behavior was acceptable, and you might even fool yourself (at least on a superficial level) into thinking the same thing. But, according to this view, there is a sense in which you're really not getting away with it. The major religions all have something to say about the price we ultimately pay for our earthly transgressions. It may have to do with the place in which we are eventually forced to reside (and I don't mean New Jersey), or it may concern the number of times we have to live again before we get it right, or it may simply concern the humiliation of being confronted in the afterlife with a litany of our sins (possibly presented by our victims). But whatever the scenario is supposed to be, the underlying common theme is that, sooner or later, we'll pay for our wrongdoing, even if we reap some benefits in the short term.

Interestingly, certain forms of modern secular humanism also advocate the theme that you can't fool God, although of course humanists state this theme (and other religious views) without referring to a deity. So instead of saying "you can't fool God," some humanists might argue that people know in their hearts when they are doing wrong, even if they can't articulate exactly what they feel is wrong about their actions. According to these humanists, the price we pay for our wrongdoing is internal. Echoing a viewpoint as old as Plato, they claim that in some sense our minds will be disordered or unsettled, or that we will otherwise be profoundly agitated or unhappy, no matter what sorts of superficial or temporary rewards we enjoy.

A somewhat different humanistic approach would be to say that there are natural laws or regularities governing behavior. These laws are presumably of a statistical rather than universal nature; that is, they have exceptions. But, like statistical generalizations about the dangers of certain foods, we ignore them at our peril. Hence, humanists of this sort might argue that it is generally (even if not universally) true that people eventually pay for their wrongdoings, whether it is in terms of how they make themselves ill, alienate others, or engage in various forms of self-defeating behavior. Of course, some humanists simply reject the notion that there is *any* secular analogue to the claim that you can't fool God. For them, that is simply one of many religious superstitions we should reject.

The evidence from parapsychology adds an interesting wrinkle to this issue. It suggests that physical separateness between people is relatively unimportant and that our psychic interactions link us closely into a kind of global community. The intimidating implication of this is that we seem to have more than the normal ways of gaining information about and affecting—even taking action against—one another. Hence, the data of parapsychology suggest that people might pay for their wrongdoings by means of psychic interventions. But in that case, we can apparently interpret the claim that you can't fool God in a way consistent with both deism and modern humanism (or at least forms of those positions willing to embrace the existence of psychic functioning). And on a related but somewhat less sinister note, the data of parapsychology might also help us understand the apparent (if only sporadic) efficacy of prayer.

### What the Evidence Suggests

In his contribution to this volume, Charles Tart surveyed certain kinds of evidence for the existence of ESP and PK. And given the context of his paper, he quite appropriately emphasized the sort of controlled, laboratory, and quantitative data that many scientists (erroneously, in my view) take to be of paramount significance. But some of the most interesting parapsychological evidence comes from venues outside the lab, and I submit that some of this evidence (particularly the best cases of reported large-scale PK) is at least as clean as evidence gathered from traditional and formal controlled experiments. In fact, I believe that non-laboratory evidence promises insights into the nature of

psychic functioning far greater than anything we could conceivably learn from laboratory research (see Braude, 1987, 1989, 1997 for an explanation and defense of this general position).

So let us suppose (if only to see where it leads) that I am right, and that non-laboratory evidence for psychic functioning must be taken seriously. And let us consider what that body of evidence suggests about the scope of human intention and the possible purposiveness behind seemingly impersonal events.

To begin with, if we take seriously the non-experimental evidence for PK, then we have reason to believe that humans can intervene in day-to-day occurrences to an extent that most people (in the West, at any rate) would find deeply intimidating. For one thing, once we grant that psi can occur in real-life situations, we must also grant that those occurrences may go undetected. But in that case, there is no reason to think that all instances of observable PK will be as obvious or incongruous as (say) table levitations or other movements of ordinarily stationary objects. Similarly, there is no reason to think that occurrences of everyday PK will be preceded by some sort of overt precursor or warning (a paranormal counterpart to a flourish of trumpets). For all we know, everyday PK might blend smoothly into ordinary surrounding events. Moreover, both laboratory and non-laboratory studies suggest that psi phenomena can have both conscious and unconscious causes. And since human intentions and desires are all too frequently malevolent, it may be that psi effects are not always innocuous or benign. In fact, real-life PK might affect or cause events of a sort that we believe usually occur in the absence of PK (e.g., heart attacks, car crashes, good or bad "luck," ordinary decisions and volitions, healing). The magnitude of PK presumably required for such effects is no greater (or at least not substantially greater) than that for which we already have good non-experimental evidence. And since there seems to be no way to determine conclusively whether psychic intervention played a role in the underlying causal history of an event, it might be impossible in principle to distinguish a psychically caused or influenced event from one that occurred in the absence of psychic influence.

If this view of things is on the right track, then it looks as if we might have to adopt what most Westerners would consider to be a magical world view, one which we associate (usually condescendingly) only with so-called primitive societies. According to this world view, our conscious and unconscious desires can surreptitiously influence a wide range of surrounding events,

including those we think we are merely observing rather than helping to cause. Hence for all we know, we might be wholly or partly responsible for a wide variety of occurrences, both local and remote.

Clearly, a similar set of observations can be made about the forms of ESP. Just as occurrences of PK might inconspicuously permeate everyday events such as car crashes and heart attacks (whether or not those events seem to connect with our own interests), our mental lives might conceal a rich vein of telepathic and clairvoyant interactions. Occurrences of ESP, like occurrences of PK, needn't announce their paranormal ancestry beforehand or in some other way display their paranormal nature. For example, although some of our psychic experiences might stand out like a sore thumb, in general there needn't be anything about psychic experiences that—like a marker or label—distinguishes them from ordinary subjective experiences. And it does not matter whether those paranormal mental events are continuous or discontinuous with our ongoing inner episodes. In either case, there may be no way in principle to distinguish ordinary sorts of thoughts and feelings from those that have an underlying paranormal causal history. For example, although a telepathic experience might disrupt our train of thoughts and appear incongruous, that incongruity proves nothing about the nature of the experience. The reason, of course, is simply that not all incongruous thoughts have paranormal causes. Our thoughts might be (or merely seem) disconnected for a variety of mundane reasons.

Furthermore, the non-experimental evidence for ESP—particularly, the evidence from mental mediumship and precognition—suggests that the cognitive forms of psi may be considerably more extensive and refined than we might have thought simply on the basis of laboratory studies. The non-experimental evidence also buttresses laboratory data suggesting that telepathy and clairvoyance are at least two-stage processes. The initial interaction might occur unconsciously, and then later the information received might bubble up to the surface in a form that is both convenient and appropriate (e.g., a feeling, or an image, or an urge or impulse to act). Similarly, telepathic influence needn't manifest immediately. Like post-hypnotic suggestions, the effects of such influence might be delayed until an appropriate time.

Ironically, once we grant the possibility (in fact, the likelihood) that psi occurs outside the lab or seance room and plays a role in everyday life, we must concede that it might also be an

unrecognized causal factor in ordinary scientific experiments. And if so, it is easy to see how this would complicate the interpretation of normal and apparently straightforward scientific research. After all, it is absurd to think that PK (for example) occurs only in experimentation conducted by parapsychologists. If PK occurs in laboratory situations and can affect the sensitive and delicate equipment designed to test for it, *and* if it can occasionally occur unconsciously in those situations (as some studies suggest), one would expect this to be possible—if not probable—in ordinary laboratory work. Hence, for all we know, psi influence might have been biasing the results of centuries of scientific experimentation. That possibility might be one reason why many scientists resist taking a serious look at the evidence from parapsychology. It is part of a more general concern that extends well beyond the scientific community. Many people seem to think that by admitting the reality of psychic functioning, especially day-to-day and inconspicuous psi, we are conceding that things could really get out of hand. And it is not simply that scientific experimentation may be deeply unreliable. For all we know, we might be living in a world in which we need to fear the malevolent thoughts of others, and also the responsibility of dealing with the possible psychic efficacy of our own unsavory impulses and desires. The problem of the resistance to psi is extremely complex and fascinating, and some writers have had interesting and provocative observations to make about it (see, e.g., Eisenbud, 1970, 1982, 1983; Tart, 1986; Tart & LaBore, 1986). But for now, we need only note that this resistance exists on a broad scale, and that it may plausibly be attributed to the fears and concerns just mentioned. For present purposes, what matters is how the basis for those concerns also fuels a secular interpretation of the claim that you can't fool God.

### Sneaky Psi

So how might an appeal to psychic functioning help flesh out the claim that you can't fool God? One approach would be to view psi as a psychologically safe way of expressing certain feelings (for example, guilt and anger) that have other, and probably more familiar (or at least less threatening) negative consequences.

Consider guilt first. Most of us are probably all too familiar with the ways in which feelings of guilt can prevent us from "getting away with" our reprehensible acts. For example, guilty feelings may prevent us from lying convincingly, or from exhibiting

other behaviors appropriate to the innocence we are feigning. Or, we might simply be overcome with remorse and confess our sins. Or, we might unconsciously sabotage some later activity and thereby symbolically atone for our earlier behavior. Or, we might make ourselves sick, by utilizing in a destructive way the dramatic control of our bodies so impressive in the case of placebo effects, hypnosis, and biofeedback.

But what if we manage to surmount or avoid these ordinary sorts of obstacles to successful sinning? Let us assume (perhaps without justification) that placebo effects, hypnotic control of bodily functions, and psychosomatic ailments are not expressions of PK. How (or how else) might we psychically express our guilt?

Perhaps the most obvious tactic would be to subject ourselves to various calamities that appear to originate from external sources. We could have an apparently inexplicable run of "bad luck"; or (if our troubles are not continuous) we might simply find ourselves confronted with a single major annoyance or tragedy (e.g., a serious accident, expensive car repair, lost wallet, etc.). By externalizing psi influence—that is, by obscuring its emotional origins and making our misfortune appear to emanate from outside us, we make it easier to view ourselves as victims of simple impersonal bad luck at best, and cosmic justice at worst. In either case, however, we would be attempting to deflect responsibility, both for our original reprehensible behavior and for our psychic retaliation against ourselves.

If these suggestions are on the right track, they might alter our perspective on a view of humanity captured by the Yiddish distinction between a *shlemiel* and a *shlemazel*. According to one familiar version of that distinction, a *shlemiel* is someone who spills soup on himself; a *shlemazel* has it spilt on him. So the *shlemazel* is a person who seems to be the victim of impersonal forces or the universe at large. *Shlemazels* are paradigmatic unlucky souls, and they really exist. I actually lived next door to some a number of years ago. I don't know if they were *shlemazels* before they met (and I wish I could now find that out); but their life as a married couple was a living hell of aggravations and accidents. For example, it seemed that nearly everything they bought was defective. Appliances and other electronic equipment almost invariably failed to operate out of the box; an apparently solid wooden rocking chair fell apart within their first week of ownership (with their infant sitting on it), and their cars were always in the shop (even though they owned brands noted for their reliability).

My favorite incident, however, is when the wife enthusiastically invited me over to see the photo she had just purchased of the Golden Gate Bridge. But when I saw it, I had to tell her, "Donna, that's the Brooklyn Bridge." My neighbor, in other words, had both symbolically and (in a sense) actually purchased the Brooklyn Bridge (which, as many readers will realize, is a classic—although perhaps now somewhat quaint—image of the "sucker" or "loser").

Now it might be that my neighbors, and shlemazels generally, are not merely unlucky. Instead, their misfortune might be a psi-mediated expression of their own self-hatred. Through the use of psi they might be arranging their lives to reinforce their own negative self-image, and they might accomplish this with the same degree of refinement found in more familiar forms of self-destructive behavior. And, like other types of unconsciously-driven self-destructive behaviors (for example, the way in which so many people seem to find themselves repeatedly in the same kinds of unhealthy romantic entanglements), all this would be accomplished in a way that deflects responsibility away from themselves.

In fact, acts of psychic self-aggression might be analogous in certain respects to phenomena elicited in studies of biofeedback control. For example, Basmajian (Basmajian, 1963, 1972) found that subjects could learn to fire a single muscle cell without firing any of the surrounding cells, although of course the subjects had no idea *how* they did this. Analogously, our psychic expressions of guilt or self-hatred might exhibit a similar degree of precision or refinement, and they might be executed with a similar degree of ignorance concerning the processes involved. Moreover, just as conscious willing often interferes with success in biofeedback tasks, it may likewise thwart our attempts at psychic influence. And the spectre of responsibility may, again, be one reason why it is advantageous for us to remain consciously ignorant of our roles in the process.

Having said all this, it is now easy to see how we might psychically (and unconsciously) express our anger toward others. Instead of expressing our hostility overtly, we might help arrange an accident or other nuisance for our victim. In fact, the more obscure the connection to us, the better. If a total stranger hits our victim in a car crash, we can conveniently deny any complicity in the event. After all, we didn't know the offender. Furthermore, if we allow for *symbolic* expressions of hostility, the issue becomes quite complex and even scarier. Probably, many mental health professionals would say that their patients often express hostility

toward surrogates, in order to deflect responsibility for what they are really feeling. So suppose that we are very angry (say, at a parent), and suppose that instead of taking out our anger directly at the parent, we express the anger against someone who symbolically stands for the parent—say, another parent, or someone with the same initials. But if we can symbolically express our hostility paranormally, we could do so by causing an accident to a stranger who (at least for the moment) represents the parent. And of course, because we don't know the victim, we can tell ourselves that we had nothing to do with it.

It may be, then, that at least part of the force behind the claim that you can't fool God concerns the way in which psychic influences make it difficult to escape the anger of others or the wrath we feel toward ourselves.

### The Efficacy of Prayer

On a slightly more positive note, the possibility of telepathic influence and PK might offer some insight into the apparent (if only occasional) efficacy of prayer. Obviously, psi-sympathetic secular humanists could maintain that it is through these forms of psychic influence that our prayers are sometimes answered. Even deists could hold that, at least on some occasions, prayers that seem to be answered by God are in fact answered through human psychic intervention. But if the efficacy of prayer results from psi rather than divine influence, the underlying causal story would seem to be anything but straightforward, and the prospects may not be quite as cheery as one might have thought.

Most readers, I imagine, would argue that prayers are frequently (and perhaps usually) *not* answered. So if an apparently efficacious prayer is not merely a coincidence, what needs to be explained is not simply why prayer occasionally succeeds, but also why it sometimes fails. And it is at this point that a secular explanation of prayer as psi-mediated might have certain theoretical advantages over conventional deistic interpretations.

The problem is this. For any attempt at psychic influence to succeed (whether or not it's a prayer), it must presumably navigate through an unimaginably complex web of underlying and potentially countervailing psychic interactions and barriers. On the assumption that people do function psychically, it is reasonable to assume, further, that their psychic activities have a natural setting—indeed, a natural *history*. In other words, psychic functioning



would not be the sort of thing that we call forth just to meet the demands of parapsychological research, or for other sorts of overt solicitations, such as police investigations, seances, or for the purpose of entertainment. But if psi has a natural history, it's reasonable to suppose that it is typically driven by our deepest genuine or perceived needs and interests. That is why it is implausible to regard psi as the sort of capacity that is likely to be elicited (or elicited in a full-blown form) in response to the contrived and superficial needs created by formal experimentation (Braude, 1997). Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that because people can presumably use their psychic capacities unconsciously, they might be attempting to use them continually. In fact, it is also reasonable to assume that people will (again, possibly unconsciously) erect psychic barriers or defenses against the psychic interventions of others, just as we normally go about our daily affairs with a normal armor of defenses against the more familiar and overt activities of our peers. But in that case, there is no reason to believe that our attempts at psychic influence are likely to succeed. Even if there is no limit in principle to what we can accomplish psychically, those activities may be subject to serious case-by-case practical constraints. (See Braude, 1989, 1997, for a discussion of this point.)

An example should make this clear. Consider, first, what has to happen before we can carry out an ordinary plan of action. Suppose I am a virtuoso assassin (whose high fees reflect the skill and regularity with which I succeed at my job), and suppose I am contracted to carry out a "hit" on a Mr. Jones. No matter how good I am at my profession, there are nevertheless a number of factors that can confound even my best efforts. For one thing, Mr. Jones may anticipate my actions and go into hiding, hire bodyguards, or make some other sort of security arrangements. But even more relevantly, other people will be going about their daily business, and even though these people do not have me or my job on their mind, some of their actions may inadvertently get in my way. My assassination attempt could be thwarted by elevator repairs, traffic jams, pedestrians getting in the line of fire, or even a mugger. And there are innumerable other, and presumably impersonal, sorts of countervailing factors that can likewise interfere with my course of action. I could be stymied by a flat tire, ruptured fuel line, faulty telephone, allergic reaction, ingrown toenail, airport weather delays, or an attack of the flu.

Now if our unconscious psi can be active all the time, imagine how dense the underlying nexus of interactions will be. Our prayers (or any other attempt at psychic influence) would have to penetrate a vast array of psychic activities, any one of which could interfere with or neutralize our own efforts. The obstacles to success might be so numerous and so great that there is no way to predict when any of our psychic efforts might actually succeed. Hence, even if our successes are not entirely fortuitous (because, after all, they would be related to real volitions and efforts, like those of the assassin), they might nevertheless seem quite random. Moreover, the prospect of collective prayer does not seem appreciably better. Both a lone assassin and a team of assassins can be thwarted by an enormous number of countervailing influences.

Furthermore, it is not simply the difficulty in navigating the underlying nexus of psychic interactions and barriers that might frustrate attempts to fulfill our prayers. Our failures might also result in part from the familiar and natural unreliability of our capacities and the inevitable difficulty of summoning our own best efforts. Analogously, athletes and actors cannot always perform as well as they would like (or as well as they usually do), and the best writers sometimes suffer writer's blocks and attacks of ineloquence. Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose that this formidable array of obstacles is always insurmountable. Our efforts might sometimes succeed, and when they do it may have to do with the resoluteness of our volitions or a fortuitous clearing in the customary array of hindrances. Hence, the secular interpretation of prayer as a kind of ritual for invoking our psi capacities actually makes some sense of its mixed but rather underwhelming record of success. By contrast, if we try to explain the efficacy of prayer in terms of divine intervention, then many might feel that we need to tell a variety of ad hoc, convoluted, and antecedently implausible stories about why a presumably loving God withheld his grace from us at all those times our prayers were not answered.

Of course, these considerations do not clinch the case for psi-enlightened secular humanism. For example, I realize that the so-called problem of evil is quite complex. But I believe they show that this position has more explanatory power and empirical support than some might have thought.