

An Atheist Tells Why He Rejects ESP

Introduction

These letters are private correspondence between a biologist who is best known to the public for his opposition to Postmodern (i.e., Politically Correct) science and a physicist known to the public for his writings favoring parapsychology. These letters are printed unedited and in their entirety.

Letter from Atheist to Parapsychologist, dated 23 June 2001

Thank you for *God.org Are You There?: On the Deeper Meaning of-ESP*. You are kind to include me among those receiving samples of your always-provocative writing. My response to the new track you've taken, which I might dub, for short, "Atheism is the culprit," follows.

You have already won! Recent polls show that more than half of all Americans insist that there is extra-physicality. Of those, three-quarters believe in ghosts and about the same proportion believe that psychics know things the rest of us cannot know. In another poll I saw somewhere, recently, there was majority belief among persons working in the criminal justice system that psychics can help in crime detection, this despite the complete absence of evidence to that effect.

So, those atheist scientists have little power to affect belief in the population as a whole. And the search for God continues, although it is more an insistence on the truth of a fairy-tale than it is anything like a search. It has nothing to do with natural science, which is concerned, by design, solely with *physicality*. It has no means for "investigating" non-physicality—nor does any other system of inquiry.

I remain, therefore, entirely unconvinced of any claims linking ESP to religion except the vanishingly slight possibility that highly improbable (by the mathematics we know how to do) feats of apparent ESP happen, sometimes, in rather trivial test situations. There may be something to all this; but (my) life is short. And if the ESP claimed to have been demonstrated has anything to do with God, then he or she is even nastier than is already revealed in the world's evil and the cries of innocent victims of the Nature he, she, or it is alleged to have Designed.

Sincerely yours,

Letter from Parapsychologist to Atheist, dated 09 July 2001

Thank you for your June 23 reply to my facetiously titled booklet *God.org Are You There?* Like you, I feel the burden of my years. At 87, I may even be ahead of you.

If I were planning to write another book, I would want to include your present letter without your name but with my comments, even as I did your previous letter in Chapter 7 of *God.org Are You There?* I think this kind of public exchange is the fastest way to reach a universal understanding as to what are the issues and what are the true differences of opinion. I would welcome any additional thoughts you might care to offer.

In *God.org Are You There?*, I devoted several chapters to answering the question "How and why has McConnell been convinced of the reality of

ESP? By what train of events, extending over 80 years from age six, has he been convinced of the reality of ESP despite the contrary opinion of some of the best scientists of the world, including yourself?"

You must have noticed that my expressed intention in my book was not to convince the reader of the reality of ESP but to lead him to the opinion that **my belief** in the reality of ESP could not easily be tossed aside by anyone as the 50-year aberration of an otherwise competent scientist.

Toward that end, I devoted several short chapters to an account of my intellectual life. May I suggest that you read Chapters 2, 3, 8, 9,10. These 18 pages consist of 3500 words, which you may have missed in your first reading; although they were written in anticipation of your June 23 letter.

The heart of your letter is its third paragraph, which I believe contains circular logic wherein you say that natural science "is concerned, by design, solely with *physicality*." The circular logic of this clause inheres in the words "by design" and is explained beginning on the bottom of page 33 of my book, starting with the words "The other element of the enemies' vulnerability..."

I leave the matter of circularity for your consideration, but I do have a reservation about your choice of language. Quoting from the same paragraph:

"And the search for God continues, although it is more an insistence on the truth of a fairy-tale than it is anything like a search. It has nothing to do with natural science, which is concerned, by design, solely with *physicality*. It has no means for 'investigating' non-physicality--nor does any other system of inquiry."

To round out this quotation, I add the following last sentence from your letter:

"And if the ESP claimed to have been demonstrated has anything to do with God, then he or she is even nastier than is already revealed in the world's evil and the cries of innocent victims of the Nature he, she, or it is alleged to have designed."

In the foregoing quotations, I would prefer that you replace the word "God" by "non-physicality." because I believe your use of the word "God," in what is evidently a sincerely anthropomorphic sense, suggests that you suppose that a sophisticated scientist could believe, in the light of what we know about ESP, that there could be an anthropomorphic God.

I am enclosing another copy of *God.org Are You There?: On the Deeper Meaning of ESP* in case you have mislaid the first copy.

Sincerely yours

Letter from Atheist to Parapsychologist, dated 12 July 2001

Thanks for yours of the 9th July, and for the second copy of *God.org*, which I am glad to have. Of course I had read your Chapter 7, and I thank you for quoting me, although I'm not moved, despite your comments, to change what I said in that letter.

I thought that I had earlier asserted the *sincerity* of your belief in ESP. That has not changed; I do not need to be convinced again. The *reasons* for your beliefs, moreover, are evident and comprehensible. You see patterns that others—statistically-competent scientists who have actually examined the

claims—fail to see, or who see them as so marginal or irreproducible as to suggest letting somebody else worry about them. (*Scientia longa; vita brevis.*) There is nothing new about this. A lone seer has sometimes turned out to be right about something very important; and it is always science itself that gets there, not debating or religion. More often, he has turned out to be wrong. There is a large literature on this subject: I assume you are aware of it.

How the lone seer got to his vision of the truth, his life-history, doesn't matter, except to himself. His life story may be material for biographers or poets; but it's the vision itself that counts. It either convinces or it doesn't. And I don't think materialism or atheism or naturalism has anything to do with it. If you claim the existence of a phenomenon, then you must display it or show others how to elicit it reliably. If others can't see or cause it, then the claims don't work as science; that is, they do not become a part of the ever-changing fabric of theory and experiment that is "science."

There are quite a few "theistic scientists" around these days. An entire, richly-funded Institute exists in Seattle, for the sole purpose of promoting theism, combating "materialism," and derogating standard science, especially that arch-evil, "Darwinism." But, although they convince hundreds of thousands of scientific ignoramuses, including our leading politicians and journalists, of the seriousness of their claims, working scientists in the relevant fields don't see anything serious about them. And in the meantime, the brute facts of evolutionary biology continue to accumulate, exponentially.

I do not apologize for supposing that your recent arguments, in addressing God, referred to something vaguely like the deistic Western notion (not an anthropomorphic one) of God. If that is an error, it is produced by your having sounded like the Seattle creationists. If you mean something far subtler, then you must make that clear. And still, I regret to say, that won't make the case for ESP. It could make a case for your eloquence and metaphysical imagination, now to be added to your sincerity and admirable persistence. But until you show hard evidence that prayer is answered; that psychics have done, and can do reproducibly, things simply inexplicable by current understandings of reality, and that those doings are reproducible in "your" absence but in "my" presence, that reporters of out-of-body experiences know what they cannot *possibly* have learned by ordinary means, because they happened in my plain sight while the "experiencer" was obviously asleep, or half-dead on an operating table or in an ambulance, I must throw in my lot with the skeptics.

Nothing would please me more than to discover that the skeptics and I are wrong and the dualists right. What a hope that would provide! My life might actually mean something on a world or cosmic scale, rather than not much to damned few people. And I would be less annoyed at the imminence of leaving this life for what looks to me like...well, nothing.

I wish you good luck.

Sincerely yours,

Letter from Parapsychologist to Atheist, dated 27 July 2001

I am pleased that you have taken the time and trouble in your July 12 letter to give a reasoned reply to my letter of July 09 concerning the possible reality of ESP so that we may continue our search for agreement.

The heart of your second paragraph is the sentence: "You see patterns that others--statistically competent scientists who have actually examined the claims--fail to see, or who see them as so marginal and irreproducible as to suggest letting someone else worry about them."

First, let me clarify a point. You refer to "statistically competent scientists." As I see it, statistical competence does not necessarily imply intellectual excellence. Every year, graduate-level statistical courses turn out statistically competent graduate students by the dozen who are far from being generally competent scientists.

I have searched diligently but in vain for a front rank scientist who would publicly claim to have examined the relevant experimental literature on ESP and who would say that he found that evidence too weak to justify vigorous research support. I have observed that leading scientists avoid committing their reputations to a statement of an inadequacy of the ESP evidence, even while they lend their reputations as "Fellows" of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) in support of CSICOP's voluble ESP skeptics. The end result is that there is essentially no monetary support for scientific research in this field. (See page 50 of *God.org Are You There?*)

Referring to me, you begin paragraph three with: "How the lone seer got his vision of the truth, his life history, doesn't matter, except to himself." I respectfully disagree. "How the lone seer got his vision" may tell his colleagues how much time they should spend examining his publications. The facts of my intellectual autobiography have been repeatedly published with my books and papers and should have entitled me to the attention of those scientists who could recognize the importance of ESP if ESP is real. With one exception, so far as I know, their attention to my work, favorable or otherwise, was never gained.

In paragraph three you continue: "If you claim the existence of a phenomenon, then you must display it or show that it works reliably. If others can't see it, then its claims don't work in science." In reply to this, It is my position that a few competent scientists have examined the relevant ESP data and found them sufficiently strong and reproducible to warrant research support and to warrant the attention of the other competent scientists who, like yourself, have hitherto declined to examine the evidence. I am willing to name those few supporting scientists and their journal papers.

One example is Professor Daryl Bem, a past president of the Society for Psychophysiological Research and a fellow of both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychological Society. He had a skeptical interest in parapsychology when he and I were opposing guest speakers on 20 July 1967 at the Popular Science Program of the Pittsburgh Buhl Planetarium. Five months later, having thought it over, with a little public encouragement by Henry Pierce, the Science Editor of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette (11/18/67, p.22), Prof. Bem invited me to lecture to three of his psychology classes on December 18 and 19, 1967, at Carnegie Mellon University

Dr. Bem developed an active interest in parapsychology as early as 1983. In January 1994, Bem, now at Cornell University and a full member of the Parapsychological Association, co-authored a review paper on the Ganzfeld technique for eliciting ESP, which appeared in the *Psychological Bulletin*, a journal of the American Psychological Association (volume 115[1], pp. 4-18).

In the section of my book (p.48) discussing the nature of the membership of the Parapsychological Association, I found that it has always included at least several members who are highly competent in another field of science.

Paragraph four of your letter is an interesting tale of scientific ignorance and incompetence in the lay world, but it has no relevance for or against the occurrence of ESP. If there are real phenomena being observed by the common man but being ignored by scientists, don't you think it would be a bit foolish for scientists to point to the common man's attempted explanations as evidence that the phenomena do not occur?

Regarding your fifth paragraph, I must plead guilty to the charge of referring to God facetiously and vaguely so as to encourage the layman to interpret what I say as he pleases. I did this because, after a professional lifetime spent trying to attract the critical attention of the appropriate scientific specialists, I decided in my final book to annoy scientists and to encourage religiously-minded people to take up cudgels against Science. This might attract the attention of scientists and thereby, hopefully, lead them to break the conspiracy of silence about ESP, which conspiracy I accuse the Scientific Establishment of fostering, (p. 50).

And finally, I see no reason to assume that God, if he is real in some sense, must therefore be nice rather than nasty.

Sincerely yours,