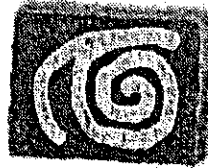


THE UNIVERSE WANTS TO PLAY  
THE ANOMALIST 12: A NONFICTION ANTHOLOGY

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COMMENTARY:  
BELIEF IN BELIEF  
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*1* *If Stavrogin believes, he does not think he believes.  
If he does not believe, he does not think he does not believe.*  
— The Possessed

“Do you think that scientific proof of life after death would change the world for the better?” asks a veteran paranormalist in a recent volume.<sup>1</sup> For the venerable author, it is clear that this question is strictly rhetorical. We are to assume that what philosophers have traditionally called “knowledge,” or Justified True Belief—JTB for short—matters. But does it? Is JTB the anomalist’s Holy Grail? Or, is it strictly a red herring?

I hate to be the skunk at the garden party (and some of my best friends are—or were—parapsychologists), but I have come to the conclusion that it is utterly pointless to attempt to prove the reality of the paranormal scientifically. This may come as a shock, but proof is part of the problem, not the solution. What we need is nothing less than an epistemological exorcism to banish that old devil, belief. We are possessed by an idea.

Faith in abstract propositions goes back at least 2500 years, to the Greeks. According to the classical scholar Peter Kinglsey,<sup>2</sup> it was Socrates and Plato who transformed the experiential search for wisdom, as practiced by shaman-seers like Parmenides, into a purely intellectualized, second-order discourse about the search for wisdom. The goal was to obtain universal definitions of concepts (e.g., “piety,” “justice”) that would apply to anyone and everyone, in all times and places, regardless of their personal experience or actual circumstances. Previously concerned with the articulation of inspired

visions, philosophy became obsessed with winning conviction by argument. Everybody had to get on board. Opponents were to be bludgeoned into submission with the heavy club of logic. Clever talk (and lots of it) replaced the vision quest as the *sine qua non* of philosophical inquiry as belief moved to center stage.

This pivotal position was cemented five hundred years later with the creation of a new religion. When St. Paul decided to market Christianity to the unwashed masses, he wisely jettisoned the onerous Judaic emphasis on ritual practice and ignored the ostensibly élitist Gnostic ideal of inward experience. Instead, Paul astutely made sheer belief, in Walter Kaufmann's memorable phrase, the one and only "gate to salvation."<sup>3</sup> Beliefs acquired a kind of magical power. It's not what you did or what you experienced that counted, but simply what you believed. This mantra would be repeated over and again in subsequent Christian history, from Martin Luther's dictum, "Faith, not works," to President Eisenhower's ecumenical benediction that everyone should have some religious belief "and I don't care what it is." Such is the sad secularized apotheosis of what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre once dubbed "the belief in belief."<sup>4</sup>

But what must be borne in mind is that Bacon's famous (or infamous) equation, "Knowledge is power," also fits squarely within this tradition. For all its vaunted empiricism, modern science inherited the concept of natural law from biblical monotheism and, with it, the Christian fetish of belief. (As Jung understood, all westerners are reflexively Christian in their habits of thought.) Thus Galileo was right, the Inquisition that condemned him wrong. So what? There was no real revolution here. We merely had two True Believers squaring off against each other. One blinked, getting his revenge only posthumously. Today all educated people profess to believe that the earth goes around the sun, and not vice-versa. But is anything really changed by this profession? Our ordinary language robustly refuses to be badgered into submission. We still speak, without apparent guilt or embarrassment, of "sunrise" and "sunset." Many philosophers will mutter in disgust, "So much the worse for ordinary language." Yet, embedded in this stubborn refusal to be cowed by an abstraction is a fundamentally healthy reflex at work. Science, like its predecessor Christianity, uses its social prestige and power to enforce compliance

and root out dissent.<sup>5</sup> Ordinary language may be the last refuge of the independent minded true empiricist.

When paranormalists hungry for validation by the scientific priesthood agree to play the old "Prove it to the Skeptic" and "Torture the Secrets out of Mother Nature" game, they are unknowingly worshipping at the bloody altar of belief in belief. However, I have a nagging suspicion that what the maverick paranormalist Rhea A. White dubs "Exceptional Human Experiences" (or EHEs) neither ask for nor require belief of this kind. Rather, as White has suggested,<sup>6</sup> EHEs call us to enact a different, less invasive and controlling, relationship to our world. In the process, we are forced to learn to pay attention to what we actually experience, as opposed to what we think we ought to experience. When and if we do this, the paranormal will cease to be "para." It will become a normal part of our world and our natural way of perceiving it. No one will have to convince anyone of anything.

In a way, this is nothing new. "Primitive" thinkers," argued the late, great iconoclast Paul Feyerabend, "showed greater insight into the nature of knowledge than their 'enlightened' philosophical rivals."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is why those few dissident holdovers from "primitive" cultures often react with barely controlled hilarity at the contorted epistemological gyrations of the average Western paranormalist. Phenomena that, to us, are amazing, unusual, or unbelievable are, as the Abenaki writer Joseph Bruchac wryly observes, "as everyday as eating and sleeping" to the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas.<sup>8</sup> "Within the tribal setting," notes the Sioux philosopher Vine Deloria, "revelation is not regarded as an unusual situation."<sup>9</sup> Why is this? Why are we Westerners so blind to the obvious?

As Deloria acknowledges, for the Western mind belief almost always trumps actual experience.<sup>10</sup> He describes, for example, how present-day astronomers are scouring the records of non-western societies (including those of the North American Indians) for evidence of a celestial supernova that occurred in 1054. Few medieval Europeans witnessed this event because they did not believe it could happen. They held that since a perfect God made the heavens, He made them perfectly stable and uniform. Comets, supernovas, and

meteors need not apply. These catastrophic intrusions did not fit in with the medieval conception of a divinely appointed order. As a result, people literally did not see what they were seeing.

Deloria attributes the native insistence on the fidelity to the particular details and epistemological priority of concrete experience over ideology to the Indians' bond with specific features of the natural landscape.<sup>11</sup> The Indian is concerned, not with putatively universal laws of nature, but with this tree, this lake, this mountain, and the experiences they engender. Particular places and objects are "holy" (*wakan*), meaning that they are power points where the mysterious energies of the universe coalesce. However, because all things are connected in a living tapestry, these nodal points would not exist if everything else were not also in its proper place. Thus Deloria cites with approval Claude Lévi Strauss's observation: "A native thinker makes the penetrating comment that 'all sacred things must have their place' . . . It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred, for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed. Sacred objects therefore contribute to the maintenance of order in the universe by occupying the places allocated to them."<sup>12</sup>

From the standpoint of a sacred geography, then, nothing is superfluous and nothing is dispensable. Everything is as it should be. This recognition simultaneously shatters another pillar of the Western belief in belief: the ideology of progress. From its inception, the belief in belief has been wedded to one form or another of the grand illusion: every day, in every way (spiritual, material, or cognitive), things are supposed to be getting better and better. The Truth (or Heaven, or the Big Score) is always Out There, somewhere else, off in the future. The expectation that "scientific proof of life after death would change the world for the better" is symptomatic of this tenacious ailment.

Is there a cure? What would happen if the perennially anxious Western mind, with its desperate drive to prove and improve, broke through to the experiential perspective of so-called "primitives"? How might this transform our approach to the paranormal?

Happily, I can here turn from the miasma of armchair academic speculation to the bracing tonic of direct observation.

Several years ago I had a student I'll call Mike in one of my philosophy classes. Mike was a puzzle. A recent immigrant from Ukraine, he spoke a heavily accented English. Quiet and unassuming, with his spiky blonde haircut and perpetual smile, Mike radiated good will and a kind of calm cheerfulness that I did not ordinarily associate with anyone of his youthful age. He had that indefinable sense of presence we call "authority." Whenever I would get too preachy in my remarks, Mike would calmly insist that the world didn't need to be reformed. I would feel chastened. I couldn't figure him out.

One day after class, Mike confessed to me that he wanted to become a filmmaker. He longed to communicate something that he felt was ultimately incommunicable. Yet he wanted to try anyway. He alluded cryptically to an experience he had had back in Odessa. I did not pry, and he was not yet ready to discuss it. Some months later, knowing of my interest in unusual experiences, Mike explained what had happened to him.

It seems that one night, Mike inhaled a bit too much of Mother Nature. What Mother Nature then revealed to him was astonishing. As his thoughts raced "with an incredible speed," he was suddenly filled with a mystical knowledge of all things. "I understood all the laws of nature," said Mike, "all the physics, math, geology—I knew EVERYTHING. All of a sudden everything made perfect sense." At the same time, he felt deeply connected with all things; so much so that, "if I'd wanted to I could have destroyed the world just by moving my finger and breaking the order of something that made it all alive. But I couldn't. Not physically, not mentally."

What is so striking about this description is that it exactly parallels Lévi Strauss's remark that, for the indigenous mind, the removal of sacred things from their rightful place, even in thought, would bring about the destruction of the entire order of the universe. What Mike brought back from his exhilarating thrill ride into an expanded awareness was not an abstract knowledge of theories and principles, but an immediate feeling of connection with a living, conscious, intelligent universe in which everything is already in its proper place. It is no wonder, then, that he instinctively resisted all my edifying blather. The script from which Mike read is an old one

indeed; one that pre-Socratics like Parmenides— not to mention Black Elk—would have recognized.

But was this a genuine breakthrough, or rather a breakdown—a psychological regression to an archaic level of mind best left to lowly “primitives”? During his episode, Mike said that the tendrils of his awareness expanded to include his parents on the other side of the city and his friends in the next building. He could see them and hear their conversations. And when he later told them what they had said, this was confirmed.

Of course, such “merely anecdotal” evidence would not count as scientific proof of the validity of Mike’s experience. He could care less. The definitive Answers for which the rest of us anxiously seek are of no interest to those who are comfortable with the unanswerable questions posed by the mystery of existence. What we call anomalies draw us into a direct experience of this great mystery, against which the standardized beliefs, creeds, and formulas of the “civilized” mind are meant to serve as a comfortable buffer. The time has come to throw away the security blanket and invite reality in. The only things we have to lose are our illusions. Let the beliefs fall where they may.

#### NOTES

- 1 Susy Smith, *The Afterlife Codes: Searching for Evidence of the Survival of the Soul*. (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2000), 213.
- 2 Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*. (Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 1999).
- 3 Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 294.
- 4 See his essay, “*The Fate of Theism*,” in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 21.
- 5 See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: NLB, 1975).
- 6 White began her career over forty years ago as a disciple of J.B. Rhine, the father of modern experimental parapsychology. But in the last decade her work has taken a very different tack. See, for example, her essays “An Experience-Centered Approach to Parapsychology” and “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of Heaven: What are EHEs and What Can We Do About Them?” in *Exceptional Human Experience, Vol. 11, No. 2* (December

1993).

7 Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 298.

8 From the introduction to his novel, *The Waters Between* (Hanover, NH: 1998), xiv-xv.

9 Vine Deloria, *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 157.

10 Vine Deloria, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1994), 136.

11 See, for example, the chapter on “Thinking in Time and Space” in *God is Red* and also the essay on “Tribal Religious Realities,” in *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1999).

12 Cited in Deloria, *Spirit and Reason*, 362.

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