

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Flying Friars and Other Exceptions

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Stephen Braude’s Editorial “Does Telepathy Threaten Mental Privacy” (Braude, 2020) speaks to one reason some people might resist accepting the reality of paranormal abilities. It is somewhat of a puzzle why so many otherwise rational people shy away from psi. The fear may be that if we accept telepathy, it might seem we’re exposed to others snooping on our innermost secrets and intentions. Deploying a distinction made by C. D. Broad between telepathic cognition and telepathic interaction, Braude argues that our fear of telepathic intrusion is greatly exaggerated. I, for example, often think of someone just before he or she calls on the phone. When that happens, I have no knowledge of what the caller is going to tell me. No cognition, just a bit of interaction. Telepathic connection doesn’t necessarily imply telepathic cognition. No danger of your hidden self being exposed in most common forms of telepathy.

There are, however, some examples where it looks like real telepathic cognition comes into play. In the early stages of 17th-century Joseph of Copertino’s career as a priest, his superiors had to ask Joseph to desist from calling out the brothers in public for every peccadillo they committed. In a typical example cited, he embarrassed a brother for thinking about eating cherries and other things while saying his prayers. His superiors urged Joseph to be more discreet and say things like—“you need to adjust your moral compass.” Joseph did learn to be more discreet, but his *Vita* shows him repeatedly tuning into the specifics of other minds. For example, he was able to distinguish persons who came merely to observe him out of curiosity (Grosso, 2017, 2016). Let me quote one sworn deposition from a Brother Francesco that illustrates telepathic cognition:

I know from experience that Padre Giuseppe had a gift from God to know the inner workings of souls. In fact, when I first went to speak with him, without ever having met me, he told me point by point everything about my life, both things of the present and things of the past, but especially things he had seen within my soul. Such things could not possibly be known by anyone except God himself. And everything that he told me was true; and he told me other things that would happen in the future and that indeed did happen. (Grosso, 2016, p. 96)

Several Catholic saints were famous for their telepathic performances in the confessional booth. The most recent example is Padre Pio, recently canonized, and famous for his fifty-year stigmata and also for his supernormal prowess as confessor (Ruffin, 2018). The novelist Graham Greene backed off from a chance to meet the Padre because he was having an illicit affair with a woman he preferred to keep secret. On one occasion the Padre was listening to a man's confession when the Padre suddenly shouted quite out loud: "Murderer!" The man fled but soon returned, and this time openly confessed he had been tempted to murder his wife. A German Lutheran convert, Friedrich Abresch, had his conscience blown confessing to the Padre and deposed:

He concealed his knowledge of my entire past under the form of questions. He enumerated with precision and clarity all of my faults, even mentioning the number of times I had missed Mass. I was completely bowled over at hearing things I had forgotten, and I was able to reconstruct that past by remembering in detail all the particulars that Padre Pio had described with such precision. (Ruffin, 2018, p. 236)

According to this account, one man was able to recollect in a coherent fashion memories forgotten by another man, a feat that might strike some as necessarily demanding divine intervention. In light of what some gifted mental mediums like Mrs. Piper can do, however, the God hypothesis might be in need of modification. Still, Braude is

correct in his conclusion not to worry about your dirty secrets being revealed. That is, as long as you don't see any bearded friars flying around outside your window.

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