

**Nicholas Humphrey.** Chapter 16 in “The Mind Made Flesh”, pp. 206-231, OUP 2002

## BEHOLD THE MAN: HUMAN NATURE AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEF<sup>1</sup>

"When you keep putting questions to Nature and Nature keeps saying ‘No’, it is not unreasonable to suppose that somewhere among the things you believe there is something that isn't true."

It might have been Bertrand Russell who said it. But it was the philosopher Jerry Fodor<sup>2</sup>. And he might have been talking about research into the paranormal. But he was talking about psycholinguistics. Still, this is advice that I think might very well be pinned up over the door of every Parapsychology Laboratory in the land, and (since I may as well identify both of my targets on this occasion) every Department of Theology too. It will serve as a text for my lecture. Alongside the following that *is* from Russell: "I wish to propose for the reader's favourable consideration a doctrine which may, I fear, appear wildly paradoxical and subversive. The doctrine in question is this: that it is undesirable to believe in a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true."<sup>3</sup>

I shall be discussing why so many people nonetheless do believe in so many things when there are no grounds for supposing them true, and even continue to do so when there are strong grounds for supposing them not true. My examples will come from magic and religion. And, since this is perhaps not what you would expect from a Professor of Psychology -- even at the New School -- I should give you some background about my own interest in these matters.

A few years ago I had the good fortune to be offered a rather attractive fellowship in Cambridge: a newly established Research Fellowship, where -- I was led to understand -- I would be allowed to do more or less whatever I wanted. But there was a catch.

The money for this fellowship was coming from the “Perrott and Warrick Fund”, administered by Trinity College. Mr. Perrott and Mr. Warrick, I soon discovered, were two members of the British Society for Psychological Research who in the 1930's had set up a fund at Trinity with somewhat peculiar terms of reference. Specifically the fund was meant to promote: "the investigation of mental or physical phenomena which seem to suggest (a) the

existence of supernormal powers of cognition or action in human beings in their present life, or (b) the persistence of the human mind after bodily death."<sup>4</sup>

Now, the trustees of the fund had been trying, for sixty years, to find worthy causes to which to give this money. They had grudgingly given out small grants here and there. But they could find hardly a single project they thought academically respectable. Indeed it sometimes seemed that the very fact that anyone applied for a grant in this area was enough to disqualify them from being given it. Meanwhile the fund with its accruing interest grew larger and larger, swelling from an initial £50,000 to well over a million. Something had to be done. Eventually the decision was made to pay for a Senior Research Fellowship at Darwin College (not at Trinity) in the general area of parapsychology and philosophy of mind, without any specific limitations. The job was advertised. I was approached by friends on the committee who knew of my outspoken scepticism about the paranormal. And -- to cut a long story short -- in what was something of a stitch-up I was told the job was mine on the understanding that I would do something sensible and not besmirch the good name of the College by dabbling in the occult or entertaining "spooks and ectoplasm".

Things do not always work out as expected. You know the story of Thomas à Beckett -- King Henry II's friend and drinking companion, whom he unwisely appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury on the understanding that he would keep the church under control? Thomas, as soon as he had the job, did an about-turn and became the church's champion *against* the king. I won't say that is quite what happened to me. But after my appointment I too underwent something of a change of heart. I decided I should take my duties as Perrott-Warrick Fellow seriously. Even if I could not bring myself to believe in any of this stuff about the supernatural, I could at least make an honest job of asking about the sources of other people's beliefs.

So I set out to see what happens when people put a particular set of "questions to Nature". The questions Messrs Perrott and Warrick would presumably have wanted their researcher to be asking would be such as: "Do human beings have supernormal powers of cognition or action in their present life"? Can they, for example, communicate by telepathy, predict how dice are going to fall, bend a spoon merely by wishing it? "Does the human mind persist after bodily death?" Can the mind, for example, re-enter another body, pass on secrets via a medium, reveal the location of ancient buried treasure? And so on.

The trouble is, as we all already know, that when you do ask *straight* questions like this, then the *straight* answer Nature keeps on giving back is indeed an uncompromising "No". No, human beings simply do not have these supernormal powers of cognition or action. Do the straightforward experiments to test for it, and you find the results are consistently negative. And No, the human mind simply does not persist after bodily death. Investigate the claims, and you find there is nothing to them. It turns out there really are "laws of Nature", that will not allow certain things to happen. And these natural laws are not like human laws which are typically riddled with *exceptions*: with Nature there are no bank-holidays, or one-off amnesties when the laws are suspended, nor are there any of those special people, like the Queen of England, who are entitled to live above the laws.

This is a shame, perhaps. But there we are. As Ernest Hemingway once said, "It would be pretty to think otherwise." But it is not otherwise. This is the world we live in. And so, you might suppose, most people would long ago have grudgingly accepted that some -- or indeed rather a lot -- of the things they would obviously have liked to believe in are not true. ESP, psychokinesis, trance channeling and so on really do not exist.

Yet it is not, of course, so simple. All right, if you put the *straight* question, the straight answer Nature gives is No. But the fact is that most people (either in or outside the fields of parapsychology and religion) usually do not ask straight questions, or, even if they do, they do not insist on getting straight answers. They tend instead to ask, for example: Do things *sometimes happen consistent with the idea of, or which would not rule out the possibility of* supernormal powers of cognition or survival after death? And the answer Nature tends to give back is not a straight "No", but a "maybe", or a "sort of", or -- rather like a politician -- a "well, yes and no". In fact sometimes Nature behaves even more like a politician. She, or whoever is acting for her, instead of saying "No", sidesteps the question and says "Yes" to something else. "Can you contact my dead uncle?" "Well, I don't know about that, but I can tell you what's written in this sealed envelope, or I can make this handkerchief vanish."

Now, part of what I set out to do during my tenure of the Fellowship was to analyse these *less than straightforward* interchanges -- whether they occur in ordinary life or in the parapsychological laboratory.

Through this I became concerned also with the question of why particular people persist in believing even though the evidence really is so unpromising -- as if nothing could change their minds. How is it, for example, that a not unthoughtful person, the Nobel-prize-winning physicist Brian Josephson will go on record saying: "It's *inevitable* that there will be an acceptance [of the reality of psychic phenomena]. I'm not exactly sure what will cause it, basically it's just a case of making everyone wake up"<sup>5</sup>? Why should anyone embrace this kind of "paranormal fundamentalism"?

Then I looked at the psycho-biography of the "extreme believers". In Britain 68% of the general population say they "believe" in a wide range of paranormal forces, in America the figure is higher still. But far fewer than this have had *direct experience*, probably only about 20%. Still less are active evangelists. But it is these last few who make the running and are responsible for keeping the subject continually in the public eye. What interested me is who these activists are and what's got into them.

About all this I wrote a book.<sup>6</sup> It ended up as quite a big book, which gives me now a problem. What do you do when you have written a book of thirty or so chapters and you are asked to give an hour long talk? We have all heard lectures where the speaker has tried to pack in a little about everything he knows. *That's* not generally a very good idea. But neither perhaps is it a *very* good idea for the speaker to devote the whole lecture to just one point or one case history. I hope you will not be disappointed therefore when I say this *is* what I am going to do: to discuss one case. But at least it is a case that touches on many of the wider issues. The case is that of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

I have several reasons for choosing Jesus. First, of course, he needs no introduction. Even those who know next to nothing about other heros of the supernatural, know at least something about Jesus. Second, I think it can be said that the miracles of Jesus, as recorded in the Bible, have done more than anything else to set the stage for all subsequent paranormal phenomena in Western culture, outside as well as inside a specifically religious context. Modern philosophy is not quite, as Whitehead once remarked, merely footnotes to Plato, and modern parapsychology is not quite footnotes to the Bible. But there can be no question that almost all of the major themes of parapsychology do in fact stem from the Biblical tradition. Third, and most important, I am choosing to discuss Jesus because I think he is probably the

best example there has ever been of a person who not only believed in the reality of paranormal powers, but believed *he himself had them*. Jesus, I shall argue, quite probably believed he was the real thing: believed he really was the Son of God, and that he really was capable of performing supernatural miracles. I am going to ask Why?

Now, no doubt one perfectly adequate answer to this question -- and a good many people's preferred answer -- would be that Jesus believed he was the real thing because *he really was the real thing*. Well, maybe. Yet there are, I would say, very strong grounds for arguing that *he really was not the real thing*. And I do not just mean the hackneyed old grounds that are usually trotted out by sceptics: namely, that it would have been scientifically impossible for him to have been the real thing, totally unprecedented, and so on. I mean there are softer but just as devastating grounds to be found in the Bible itself: namely that, when it comes down to it, Jesus simply does not seem to have behaved *enough like the real thing*. His supernatural powers (even as recorded by friends) simply were not at the level we should expect of them: they were in fact surprisingly restricted, and not only restricted but restricted in a very suggestive way. Not to put too fine a point on it, Jesus in most if not all of his public demonstrations behaved *just like a conjuror*.

I not saying anything dramatically new here; but, as you'll see, I shall be giving what has already been said a rather different emphasis. Many Biblical scholars have noted (to their dismay or glee, depending on which side they were taking) that Jesus's miracles were in fact entirely typical of the tradition of performance magic that flourished throughout the ancient world.<sup>8</sup> Lucian, a Roman born in Syria, writing in the second century AD, catalogued the range of phenomena that, as he put it, "the charlatans and tricksters" could lay on, and that were he said on display in every market place around the Mediterranean. They included walking on water, materialisation and dematerialisation, clairvoyance, expulsion of demons, and prophecy. And he went on to explain how many of these feats were achieved by normal means. He described for example a "pseudo miracle worker" called Marcus who regularly turned water into wine by mixing the water in one cup with red liquid from another cup while the onlookers' attention was distracted.

Christian apologists were, early on, only too well aware of how their Messiah's demonstrations must have looked to outsiders. They tried to play down the alarming parallels.

There is even some reason to think that the Gospels themselves were subjected to editing and censure so as to exclude some of Jesus' more obvious feats of conjuration.<sup>9</sup>

The Christian commentators were, however, in something of a dilemma. They obviously could not afford to exclude the miracles from the story altogether. The somewhat lame solution, adopted by Origen and others, was to admit that the miracles would indeed have been fraudulent if done by anybody else, simply to make money, but not when done by Jesus to inspire religious awe. Origen wrote: "The things told of Jesus would be similar to those of the magicians if Celsus had shown that Jesus did them as the magicians do, merely for the sake of showing off. But as things are, none of the magicians, by the things he does, calls the spectators to moral reformation, or teaches the fear of God to those astounded by the show."<sup>10</sup>

But, let's hold on a moment. Why has Jesus put his followers in this position of having to defend him against these accusations in the first place? If Jesus, as the Son of God, really did have the powers over mind and matter that he claimed, it should surely have been easy for him to have put on entirely different class of show, one that no one could even have suspected was mere conjury.

Think about it. If a fairy Godmother gave *you* this kind of power, what would you do with it? No doubt, you would hardly know where to begin. But, given all the wondrous things you might contrive, would you consider for a moment using these powers to mimic ordinary conjurors: to lay on magical effects of the kind that other people could lay on *without* having them? Would you produce rabbits from hats, or make handkerchiefs disappear or even saw ladies in half? Would you turn tables, or read the contents of sealed envelopes, or contact a Red Indian guide? No, I imagine you would actually take pains to distance yourself from the common conjurors and small-time spirit mediums, precisely so as not to lay yourself open to being found guilty by association.

I am not suggesting that all of Jesus's miracles were quite of this music-hall variety (although wine into water, or the finding of a coin in the mouth of a fish, are both straight out of the professional conjuror's canon). But what has to be considered surprising is that any of them were so. Moreover that so few of them, at least of those for which the reports are even moderately trustworthy, were altogether of different order.

With all that power, why can you do *this*, but not do *that*? It seems to have been a common question put to Jesus even in his lifetime. If you are *not* a conjuror, why do you behave so much like one? Why, if you are so omnipotent in general, are you apparently so impotent in particular? Why -- and this seems to have been a constant refrain and implied criticism -- can you perform your wonders *there* but not *here*?

One of the tell-tale signs of an ordinary magician would be that his success would often depend on his being able to take advantage of surprise and unfamiliarity. And so, when the people of Jesus' home town, Nazareth, asked that "whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country,"<sup>11</sup> and when Jesus failed to deliver, they were filled with wrath and suspicion and told him to get out. "And he could there do no mighty work," wrote Mark.<sup>12</sup> Note "could not" not "would not". Textual analysis has shown that it was a later hand that added to Mark's bald and revealing statement the apologetic rider, "save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them".<sup>13</sup>

The excuse given on this occasion in Nazareth was that Jesus' powers failed "because of their unbelief".<sup>14</sup> But this, if you think about it, was an oddly circular excuse. Jesus himself acknowledged, even if somewhat grudgingly, that the most effective way to get people to believe in him was to show them his miraculous powers. "Except ye see signs and wonders," he admonished his followers, "ye will not believe."<sup>15</sup> How then could he blame the fact that he could not produce the miracles they craved for on the fact that they did not believe to start with?

Did Jesus himself know the answer to these nagging doubts about his paranormal powers? Did he know why, while he could do so much, he was still unable to do all that other people -- and maybe he himself -- expected of him?

Remember the taunts of the crowd at the crucifixion, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. . . He saved others; himself he cannot save."<sup>16</sup> Hostile as these taunts were, still they must have seemed even to Jesus like reasonable challenges. We do not know how Jesus answered them. But the final words from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?", suggest genuine bewilderment about why he could not summon up supernatural help when he most needed it.

Why this bewilderment? Lets suppose, for the sake of argument, that Jesus was in fact regularly using deception and trickery in his public performances. Lets suppose that he really had no more paranormal powers than anybody else, and this means in effect he had no paranormal powers at all. Why might he have been deluded into thinking he was able *genuinely* to exert the powers he claimed?

We should begin, I think, by asking what there may have been in Jesus's personal history that could provide a lead to what came later. It seems pretty clear that Jesus's formative years were, to say the least, highly unusual. Everything we are told about his upbringing suggests that even in the cradle he was regarded as a being apart: someone who, whether or not he was born to greatness, had greatness thrust upon him from an early age.

Admittedly, it is the privilege of many a human infant to be, for a time at least, the apple of his or her parents' eyes. So that the fantasy of being a uniquely favoured human being is actually quite common among little children. For a good many it is a fantasy that is based squarely in the reality of their family relationships. The psychoanalyst Ernst Becker wrote: "The small child lives in a situation of utter dependence; and when his needs are met it must seem to him that he has magical powers, real omnipotence. If he experiences pain, hunger or discomfort, all he has to do is to scream and he is relieved and lulled by gentle, loving sounds. He is a magician and a telepath who has only to mumble and to imagine and the world turns to his desires."<sup>17</sup> Although most children must, of course, soon discover that their powers are not really all that they imagined, for many the idea will linger. It seems to be quite usual for young people to continue to speculate about their having abilities that no one else possesses. And it is certainly a common dream of adolescents that they have been personally cut out to save the world.

The fact that the young Jesus may have had intimations of his own greatness might not, therefore, have made him so different from any other child. Except that there were in his case other -- quite extraordinary -- factors at work to feed his fantasy and give him an even more exaggerated sense of his uniqueness and importance. To start with, there were the very special circumstances of his birth.

Among the Jews living under Roman rule in Palestine at the beginning of the Christian era it had been long been prophesied that a Messiah, descended from King David, would come to deliver God's chosen people from oppression. And the markers -- the tests -- by which this saviour should be recognised were known to everybody. They would include: (i) That he would indeed be a direct descendant of the King: "made of the seed of David."<sup>18</sup> (ii) That he would be born to a virgin (or, in literal translation of the Hebrew, to a young unmarried woman): "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."<sup>19</sup> (iii) That he would emanate from Bethlehem: "But thou, Bethlehem, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel."<sup>20</sup> (iv) That the birth would be marked by celestial sign: "A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel."<sup>21</sup>

We cannot of course be sure how close the advent of Jesus actually came to meeting these criteria. The historical facts have been disputed, and many modern scholars would insist that the story of the nativity as told in Matthew's and Luke's gospels was largely a *post hoc* reconstruction.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless there is, to put it at its weakest, a reasonable possibility that the gist of the story is historically accurate. (i) Even though the detailed genealogies cannot be trusted, it is quite probable that Joseph was, as claimed, descended from David. (ii) Even though it is highly unlikely that Mary was actually a virgin, she could certainly have been carrying a baby before she was married; and, if the father was not Joseph, Mary might -- as other women in her situation have been known to -- have claimed that she fell pregnant spontaneously. (iii) Although Joseph himself came from Nazareth, the story that he and Mary were commanded to go to Bethlehem for a population census and that the birth occurred there is not implausible. (iv) Although the exact date of Jesus's birth is not known, it is known that Halley's comet appeared in the year 12 BC; and, given that other facts suggest that Jesus was born between 10 and 14 BC, there could have been a suitable "star".

Some sceptics have felt obliged to challenge the accuracy of this version of events on the grounds that the Old Testament prophets could not possibly have "foretold" what would happen many centuries ahead. But such scepticism is, I think, off target. For the point to note is that there need be nothing in itself miraculous about foretelling the future, provided the prophet has left it open as to when and where the prophecy is going to be fulfilled. Given that a tribe of, let's say, a hundred thousand people could be expected to have over a million births

in the course of, let's say, three hundred years, the chances that one of these births might “come to pass” in more or less the way foretold are relatively high. It's not that it would *have* to happen to someone somewhere, it is just that, if and when it did happen to someone somewhere, there would be no reason to be too impressed.

The further point to note, however, is that even though there may be nothing surprising about the fact that lightning, for example, strikes somebody somewhere, it may still be very surprising to the person whom it strikes. While nobody is overly impressed that someone or other wins the lottery jack-pot every few weeks, there is almost certainly some particular person who cannot believe his or her luck -- somebody who cannot but ask: “Why me?” For the winner of the lottery herself and her close friends, the turn of the wheel will very likely have provided irresistible evidence that fate is smiling on her.

So too, maybe, with the family of Jesus. Suppose that through a chapter of accidents -- we need put it no more strongly than that -- the birth of Jesus to Joseph and Mary really did meet the pre-ordained criteria. Assume that the set of coincidences was noticed by everyone around, perhaps harped on especially by Mary for her own good reasons, and later drawn to the young boy's attention. Add to this an additional stroke of fortune (which, as told in Matthew's gospel, may or may not be historically accurate): namely, that Jesus escaped the massacre of children that was ordered by Herod, so that he had good reason to think of himself as a “survivor”. It would seem to be almost inevitable that his family -- and later he himself -- would have read deep meaning into it, and that they would all have felt there was a great destiny beckoning.

The image a person has of himself is bound to have a crucial influence on his psychological development. Not only will it shape his choices as to what he attempts to make of his own life, but -- because of that -- it will frequently be self-confirming. The man who believes himself born to be King will attempt to act like a King. The man who knows himself to have been selected from all the possible Tibetan babies to be the future Dalai Lama will allow himself to grow into the part. Children of Hollywood parents who are pushed towards fame and fortune on the stage will sometimes be dramatically successful (provided they are not, by having too much of it, dramatically hurt).

This kind of moulding of a person's character to match an imposed standard can be effective even when the pressures are relatively weak. A surprising, but possibly apposite,

example is provided by a recent finding in the area of astrology. When the psychologist Hans Eysenck looked to see whether there is any correlation between particular individuals' "sun signs" and their personality, he discovered that people born under the odd numbered signs of the zodiac (Aries, Gemini, Leo, Libra, Sagittarius, Aquarius) do in fact tend to be more extrovert than those born under the even-numbered signs (Taurus, Cancer, Virgo, Scorpio, Capricorn, Pisces) -- just as predicted by astrologers.<sup>23</sup> But the explanation for this curious finding is almost certainly not that people are being directly influenced by astral forces. A much more likely explanation is that enough people regularly read their horoscopes for the astrologers' predictions to have had a profound effect on what individuals *expect* about their own character and the ways they behave. Further studies by Eysenck showed that the correlation is, in fact, absent in those (relatively few) adults who profess to know nothing about their sun sign or what it "ought" to mean for them; and it is also absent in children.<sup>24</sup>

Now, if an individual's psychological development can be influenced merely by reading a newspaper horoscope, imagine how it might affect a young man for him to have been born, as it were, under the "sign of the Messiah". It would be wholly predictable that, as the meaning dawned on him, it would turn his head to some degree.

The accounts of Jesus' youth do in fact tell of a boy who, besides being highly precocious, was in several ways somewhat full of himself and even supercilious.<sup>25</sup> According to the Book of James (a near contemporary "apocryphal gospel", supposedly written by Jesus' brother), Jesus during his "wondrous childhood" struck fear and respect into his playmates by the tricks he played on them. Luke tells the revealing story of how, when Jesus was twelve, he went missing from his family group in Jerusalem and was later discovered by his worried parents in the Temple "sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions." His mother said: "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing." To which the boy replied: "How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"<sup>26</sup>

Still, no one can survive entirely on prophecy and promise. However special Jesus thought himself in theory, it is fair to assume he would also have wanted to try his hand in practice. He would have sought -- privately as well as publicly -- confirmation of the reputation that was

building up around him. He would have wanted concrete evidence that he did indeed have special powers.

In this Jesus would, again, not have been behaving so differently from other children. Almost every child probably seeks in small ways to test his fantasies, and conducts minor experiments to see just how far his powers extend. "If I stare at that woman across the street, will she look round?" (Yes, every so often she will.) "If I pray for my parents to stop squabbling, will they let up?" (Yes, it usually works.) "If I carry this pebble wherever I go, will it keep the wolves away? (Yes, almost always.) But we may guess that Jesus, with his especially high opinion of his own potential, might also have experimented on a grander scale. "If I command this cup to break in pieces. . .," "If I wish my brother's sandals to fly across the room. . .," "If I conjure a biscuit to appear inside the urn. . ."

Unfortunately, unless Jesus really did have paranormal powers, such larger scale experiments would mostly have been unsuccessful. The facts of life would soon have told him there was a mismatch between the reality and his ambitions. Jesus would, however, have had to be a lesser child than obviously he was if he let the facts stand in the way -- accepting defeat and possible humiliation. In such circumstances, the first step would be to *pretend*. And then, since pretence would never prove wholly satisfactory, the next step would be to *invent*.

Break the cup by attaching a fine thread and pulling. . . Hide the biscuit in your sleeve and retrieve it from the urn. . . By doing so, at least you get to see how it would feel *if* you were to have those powers. But what is more, provided you keep the way you do it to yourself, you get to see how other people react *if they believe* you actually do have special powers. And since you yourself have reason to think -- and in any case they are continually telling you -- that deep down you really do possess such powers (even if not in this precise way on the surface), this is fair enough.

So it might have come about that the young Jesus began to play deliberate tricks on his family and friends and even on himself -- as indeed many other children, probably less talented and committed than he was, have been known to do when their reputation is at stake. Yet, although I say "even on himself", it hardly seems likely he could successfully have denied to himself what he was up to. In such a situation you may be able to fool other people most of the time, but not surely yourself. Pretending is one thing. Deluding yourself is another thing

entirely. It is nonetheless your reputation in your own eyes that really matters. Jesus's position therefore would not have been an easy or a happy one.

Imagine what it might feel like: to be pretty sure that you have paranormal powers, to have other people acclaiming that what you do is indeed evidence that you have these powers, but to know that none of it is for real. The more that other people fall for your inventions, the more surely you would yearn for evidence that you could in fact achieve the same results without having to pretend.

Suppose, then, that one day it were to have come about that Jesus discovered, to his own surprise, that his experiments to test his powers had the desired effect *without* his using any sort of trick at all! What might he have made of it then?

I speak from some experience of these matters (and surely some of you have had similar experiences too). Not, I should say, the experience of deliberately cheating (at least no more than anyone else), but rather of discovering as a child that certain of my own experimental "try-ons" were successful when I least expected it.

For example, when I was about six years old I invented the game of there being a magic tree on Hampstead Heath, about half a mile from where we lived in London. Every few days I used to visit the tree, imagining to myself "what if the fairies have left sweets there?". Sometimes I would say elaborate spells as I walked over there, although I would have felt a fool if anyone had heard me. Yet, remarkably, not long after I began these visits, my spells began to work. Time after time I found toffees in the hollow of the tree trunk.

Or, for another example, when my brother and I were a bit older we started digging for Roman remains in the front garden of our house on the Great North Road in London. Each night we would picture what we would discover the next day, although we had little faith that anything would come of it. Resuming the dig one morning we did find, under a covering of light earth, two antique coins.

Draw your own conclusions about these particular examples. I have, however, a still better case history to tell, which may arguably provide a closer parallel to Jesus's own story. It concerns a teenage boy, Robert, who had become famous as a "mini-Geller," a child spoon-bender, and who I met while taking part in a radio programme about the paranormal. I'll tell it here as I wrote it up for a newspaper some years ago:<sup>27</sup>

He had come with his father to the studio to take part in an experiment on psychic metal-bending. He was seated at a table, on which was a small vice holding a metal rod with a strain-gauge attached to it, and his task was to "will" the rod to buckle.

Half an hour passed, and nothing happened. Then one of the production team, growing bored, picked up a spoon from a tea-tray and idly bent it in two. A few minutes later the producer noticed the bent spoon. "Well I never," she said. "Hey Robert, I think it's worked." Both Robert and his father beamed with pleasure. "Yes," Robert said modestly, "my powers can work at quite a distance; sometimes they kind of take off on their own."

Later that afternoon I chatted to the boy. A few years previously Robert had seen Uri Geller doing a television show. Robert himself had always been good at conjuring, and - just for fun - he had decided to show off to his family by bending a spoon by sleight of hand. To his surprise, his father had become quite excited and had told everybody they had a psychic genius in the family.

Robert himself, at that stage, had no reason to believe he had any sort of psychic power. But, still, he liked the idea and played along with it. Friends and neighbours were brought in to watch him; his Dad was proud of him. After a few weeks, however, he himself grew tired of the game and wanted to give up. But he did not want people to know that he had been tricking them: so, to save face, he simply told his father that the powers he had were waning.

Next day something remarkable happened. At breakfast, his mother opened the dresser and found that *all* the cutlery had bent. Robert protested it had nothing to do with him. But his Dad said: How did he know - perhaps he had done it unconsciously. . . There was no denying the cutlery had bent. And how *does* a person know if he has done something *unconsciously*? It was then that Robert realised he must be genuinely psychic.

Since that time, he had received plenty of confirmation. For example, he had only to think about a clock in the next room stopping, and when his father went in he would find that it had stopped. Or he would lie in bed thinking about the door-bell, and it would suddenly start ringing. He had to admit, however, that he was not exactly in control. And the trouble was that people kept on asking him to do more than was psychically within his power. So just occasionally he would go back to using some kind of trick. . . He would not have called it cheating, more a kind of psychic "filling-in".

Such was the boy's story. Then I talked to his father. Yes, the boy had powers all right: he had proved it time and again. But he was only a kid, and kids easily lose heart; they need encouraging. So, just occasionally, he - the father - would try to restore his son's confidence by arranging for mysterious happenings around the house. . . He would not have called it cheating either, more a kind of psychic "leg-up".

This *folie á deux* had persisted for four years. Both father and son were into it up to their necks, and neither could possibly let on to the other his own part in the deception. Not that either felt bad about the "help" he was providing. After all, each of them had independent evidence that the underlying phenomenon was genuine.

The purpose of my telling this story is not to suggest any exact parallel with Jesus, let alone to point the finger specifically to anyone in Jesus's entourage, but rather to illustrate how easily an honest person *could* get trapped in such a circle: how a combination of his own and others' well-meaning trickery *could* establish a life-time pattern of fraud laced with genuine belief in powers he did not have.

Still, I cannot deny that, once the idea has been planted that Jesus became caught up this way, it is hard to resist asking who might conceivably have played the supporting role. His mother? Or, if it continued into later years, John the Baptist? Or, later still, Judas, or one of the other disciples? Or all of them by turns? They all had a great interest in spurring Jesus on.

I do not want to suggest any exact parallel with anyone else either. But there are I think several clues that point to the possibility that just this kind of escalating folly might have played a part in the self-development of several other recent heroes of the paranormal.

Many modern psychics -- notably the Victorian spiritualist D. D. Home, and in our own times Uri Geller -- have been childhood prodigies. In Geller's case, for example, it is reported that "At about the age of five he had the ability to predict the outcome of card games played by his mother. Also he noted that spoons and forks would bend while he was eating. . . . At school his exam papers seemed identical to those of classmates sitting nearby. . . . Classmates also reported that, while sitting near Geller, watches would move forwards or backwards an hour."<sup>28</sup> And the same precocity is evident with several of those who have gone on to be, if not psychics themselves, powerful spokesmen for the paranormal. Arthur Koestler, for example, has told of how as a boy he "was in demand for table-turning sessions in Budapest."<sup>29</sup>

It is also significant that when, as has frequently happened, celebrated psychics have been discovered to be cheating by non-paranormal means, they have nonetheless maintained that they did not *always* cheat. And it is significant too that their supporters have found this

mixture of fake and real powers plausible and even reasonable. Of Geller, Koestler said: "Uri is certainly 25 percent fraud and 25 percent showman, but 50 percent is real."<sup>30</sup>

But on top of this there is the remarkable degree of self-assurance that these people have typically displayed. Again and again they have left others with the strong impression that they really do believe in their own gifts. Geller has impressed almost all who have met him -- I include myself among them -- as a man with absolute faith in his own powers. He comes over as being, as it were, the chief of his own disciples. And it is hard to escape the conclusion that in the past and maybe still today he has had incontrovertible evidence, as he sees it, that he is genuinely psychic.

Let me give a small example: when Geller visited my house and offered to bend a spoon, I reached into the kitchen drawer and picked out a spoon that I had put there for the purpose -- a spoon from the Israeli airline with EL AL stamped on it. Geller at once claimed credit for this coincidence: "You pick a spoon at random, and it is an Israeli spoon! My country! These things happen all the time with me. I don't know how I influenced you." I sensed, as I had done with Robert, that Geller was really not at all surprised to find that he had, as he thought, influenced me by ESP. It was as if he took it to be just one more of the strange things that typically happen in his presence and which he himself could not explain *except* as evidence of his paranormal powers -- "those oddly clownish forces", as he called them on another occasion.<sup>31</sup>

The suspicion grows that someone else has over the years been "helping" Geller without his knowing it, by unilaterally arranging for a series of apparently genuine minor miracles to occur in his vicinity. A possible candidate for this supportive role might be his shadowy companion, Shipi Shtrang. Shtrang, Geller's best friend from childhood, later his agent and producer, and whose sister he married, would have had every reason to encourage Geller in whatever ways he could; and Geller himself is on record as saying that his powers improve when Shtrang is around. (Noting the family relationship between Shtrang and Geller, we might note too that John the Baptist and Jesus were related: their mothers, according to Luke, were first cousins.)

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Now, maybe this all seems too much and too Machiavellian. If you do not see how these examples have any relevance to that of Jesus, you do not see it, and I will not insist by spelling it out further.

But now I have a different and more positive suggestion to make about why a man as remarkable as Jesus (and maybe Geller too) might have become convinced he could work wonders -- and all the more strongly as his career progressed. It is that, in some contexts, the very fact of being remarkable may be enough to achieve semi-miraculous results.

I have as yet said little of Jesus as a “healer”. My reason for not attending to this aspect of his art so far is that so-called “faith healing” is no longer regarded by most doctors, theologians or parapsychologists as being strictly paranormal. Although, until quite recently, the miracle cures that Jesus is reported to have effected were thought to be beyond the scope of natural explanation, they no longer are so.

It is now widely recognised by the medical community that the course of many kinds of illness, of the body as well as of the mind, can be influenced by the patient's hopes and expectations and thus by the suggestions given him by an authority figure whom he trusts.<sup>33</sup> Not only can the patient's own mental state, guided by another, profoundly affect the way he himself perceives his symptoms, but it can also help mobilise his body's immunological defences to help achieve more lasting recovery. It is unfortunately true that only certain sorts of illness benefit, and that in any case the effects are not always permanent -- so that the pain or the stiffness or the depression tends to return. But, at least in the short term, the cure can be dramatic.

To say that these cures have a normal explanation, however, is not to deny that they may often rely on the *idea* of a paranormal explanation. In fact, it is often quite clear that they do rely on it. It is for most people, including the healer, extremely hard to imagine how the

voice or the touch of another person could possibly bring about a cure unless this other person were to have paranormal powers. It follows that the more the patient believes in these powers, the more he will be inclined to take the suggestions seriously -- and the better they will work. Equally, the more the healer himself believes in his powers, the more he can make his suggestions sound convincing -- and again the better they will work.

The consequence is that a kind of virtuous circle can get established. Success in bringing about a cure feeds back to the healer, boosting both his image in the eyes of the world and his image of himself. And thereafter nothing succeeds like more success. The process must of course be launched in some way. There has to be some degree of faith present initially, or otherwise the process cannot be expected to get going. But all that this requires is that there should already be some small reason -- however unsubstantiated -- why people should consider the healer a special person.

In Jesus's case we can assume that, for some or all of the reasons given earlier, his reputation as a potential miracle worker would in fact have been established early in his career and have run ahead of him wherever he went. He would very likely have found therefore that he had surprisingly well developed capacities for healing almost as soon as he first attempted it. And thereafter, as word spread, he would have got better at it still.

Thus, even if I am right in suggesting that his own or others' subterfuges played some part in creating the general mystique with which he was surrounded, we may guess that in this area Jesus would soon have found himself being given all the proof he could have asked for that he was capable of the real thing.

A minor but instructive parallel can again be provided by the case of Uri Geller. As far as I know, Geller has never claimed to be able to heal sick human beings, but he has -- as we saw earlier -- certainly claimed to be able to heal broken watches. In fact this was one of the phenomena by which he made his name.

In a typical demonstration Geller would ask someone to provide him with a watch that had stopped working and then, merely by grasping it in his hands for a minute or so, he would set it going again. In his own words (as ever disarmingly ingenuous): "I put an energy into it. I don't know what kind of energy it is, but apparently it fixes the watch. I don't think it will ever stop again. Maybe it will, but it's working because I'm around now."<sup>34</sup>

As with human healing, this kind of watch-cure may in fact be perfectly genuine. It works when it does because the commonest cause of a watch breaking down is that it has become jammed with dust and thickened oil; and, if such a watch is held in the hand for a few minutes, body heat can warm and thin the oil and free the mechanism. When the psychologists David Marks and Richard Kammann, investigating the phenomenon, collected an unbiased sample of sixty one broken watches and subjected them merely to holding and handling, they found that 57 per cent were successfully started.<sup>35</sup> As with human healing, the cure does not work if there are actually parts broken or missing, nor is it usually permanent. But the effect is unexpected and impressive all the same.

The cure can easily *seem* paranormal. So, it is not surprising that few if any people watching Geller realised they could in fact perfectly well do it on their own without Geller's encouragement. What probably occurred, therefore, was another example of positive feedback. The higher were people's expectations of Geller's powers -- based, as with Jesus, on his preceding reputation as a psychic -- the more likely they were to rely on him to give the lead with his suggestions, and hence the more successes and the more his reputation spread.

But the crucial question now is what Geller himself thought of it. Is it possible that he was as impressed by his own achievements as everybody else? Suppose he himself had no more understanding of how watches work (at least until it was forcibly brought to his notice by sceptics) than Jesus had of how the immune system works. In that case he could easily have deduced that he really did have some kind of remarkable power. Like Jesus, he would have been finding that in one area he could genuinely meet his own and others' expectations of him.

And yet . . . And yet “about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Many have speculated on what he meant. But if at the point of death Jesus really did speak these opening lines of the Twenty-second Psalm, the clue may lie, I suggest, in the way the psalm continues. “Why art thou so far from helping me? . . . Thou art he that took me out of the womb; thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts.”<sup>36</sup>

It was Jesus's tragedy -- his glory too -- to have been cast in a role that no one could live up to. He did not choose to be taken from the womb of a particular woman, at a particular place, under a particular star. It was not his fault that he was given quite unrealistic hopes

upon his mother's breasts. He did his best to be someone nobody can be. He tried to fulfil the impossible mission. He played the game in the only way it could be played. And the game unexpectedly played back -- and overtook him

Dostoevsky, during his travels in Europe, saw in a Basel church Holbein's brutally natural painting of the "Dead Christ", showing the body of the Saviour reduced to a gangrenous slab of meat upon a table. In his novel *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin confronts a reproduction of the picture in a friend's house: "That picture. . . that picture!" Myshkin cries, "Why, some people might lose their faith by looking at that picture". Then later in the novel Myshkin's *alter ego*, Ippolit, continues: "As one looks at the body of this tortured man, one cannot help asking oneself the peculiar and interesting question: if the laws of nature *are* so powerful, then how *can* they be overcome? How can they be overcome when even He did not conquer them, He who overcame nature during His lifetime and whom nature obeyed? . . . Looking at that picture, you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable and dumb beast, or . . . as some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces and swallowed up -- impassively and unfeelingly -- a great and priceless Being, a Being worth the whole of nature and all its laws. . . If, on the eve of the crucifixion, the Master could have seen what He would look like when taken from the cross, would he have mounted the cross and died as he did?"<sup>37</sup>

Nature as some enormous, implacable and dumb beast . . . a huge and senseless engine. Here is what has been at issue all along. *Nature is the enemy*. What Christ's life seemed to promise, what the paranormal has always seemed to promise people is that we, mere human beings, can vanquish this dumb beast of natural law. What the emptiness of this promise eventually forces us to recognise is that, when we do treat Nature as the enemy and seek to conquer her, Nature inevitably has the last depressing word: "No." We put the question, "Can a man be a god?" and Nature says -- as only she knows how -- "No, a man can be only a mortal man."

Yet perhaps where we go wrong is with our idea of what we would *like* Nature to say. The assumption that we would be better off if Nature did say "Yes -- I surrender, you can have your miracles."

This is not the point at which to open up a whole new line of argument. But, so as to lighten this discussion at the end, I shall leave you to consider this quite different possibility: that Nature -- Mother Nature -- is not the enemy at all, but in reality the best ally we could possibly have had. That the world we know and everything we value in it has come into being *because of* and not *despite* the fact that the laws of nature are as they are. And what is more, that it may have been an essential condition of the evolution of life on earth that these laws *preclude* the miracles that so many people imagine would be so desirable: action at a distance, thought transfer, survival of the mind after death, and so on. The possibility that the dumb beast -- Nature and her laws -- is actually something of a Beauty.

I expect you have heard of the so-called "anthropic principle": the idea that the laws of physics that we live with in our universe are as they are because if they weren't as they are, this universe wouldn't be the kind of place in which human beings could exist. Adjust the laws ever so little, and it would all go wrong: the universe would expand too fast or too slowly, it would become too hot or too cold, organic molecules would be unstable -- and we human beings would not be here to observe and seek the meaning of it.

I believe there is a similar story to be told about the paranormal.<sup>38</sup> That's to say, if the laws of nature were to be adjusted to allow for paranormal phenomena, this too would have a disastrous consequences for human beings, fatally compromising their individuality and creativity and undermining the basis of biological and cultural progress. It would not only be the end of life as we know it, but very possibly enough to prevent life ever having started.

If this is right, it means there is a kind of *Catch 22* about research in parapsychology, at least if you try to live up to the expectations of the gentlemen who endowed the Perrott-Warrick Fellowship. For it means, perhaps, that you can only be asking those questions of Nature -- looking for supernormal powers of cognition or action, or the persistence of the mind after death -- in a world where Nature is *bound* to answer: "No, there's nothing to it." Because in any world where Nature could say Yes to those questions, we would not be here to ask them.

1. Inaugural Lecture, New School for Social Research, November 1995; partly based on Chapters 13 and 14 of Nicholas Humphrey, 1995, *Soul Searching: Human Nature and Supernatural Belief*, London: Chatto and Windus.

2. Jerry Fodor, 1981, *Representations*, p.316, Cambridge Ma.: MIT Press.
3. Bertrand Russell, 1928, *Sceptical Essays*, opening paragraph, London: Allen & Unwin.
4. Advertisement for the Perrott-Warrick Fellowship, Darwin College, Cambridge, 1991.
5. Brian Josephson, 1995, interviewed in *Varsity*, Cambridge University student newspaper, 17 February 1995.
6. Nicholas Humphrey, 1995, *Soul Searching: Human Nature and Supernatural Belief*, London: Chatto and Windus; 1996, *Leaps of Faith: Science, Miracles and the Search for Supernatural Consolation*, New York: Basic Books.
7. Biblical accounts of Jesus' life cannot of course be trusted to be historically accurate: they were written many years after the supposed events, and in any case they were the work of men who had an obvious interest in embellishing their stories. We cannot expect to be able to subject the reports of Jesus' miracles to the kind of cross-examination we might want to give a more reliable history. Nevertheless, it is a valuable exercise to consider what we should make of this testamentary evidence *if* we had reason to take it at face value.
8. See accounts in Morton Smith, 1978, *Jesus the Magician*, London: Gollancz; Paul Kurtz, 1986, *The Transcendental Temptation*, Buffalo: Prometheus Books.
9. Morton Smith, 1978, op. cit., pp. 92-3.
10. Origen, *Against Celsus*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 83.
11. Luke 4:23.
12. Mark 6:5.
13. Morton Smith, 1978, op. cit., p. 141.
14. Matthew 13:58.
15. John 4:48.
16. Matthew 27:40, 42.
17. Ernst Becker, 1973, *The Denial of Death*, p. 18, New York: Free Press.
18. Romans 1:3.
19. Isaiah 7:14.
20. Micah 5:2.

21. Numbers 24:17.
22. Robin Lane Fox, 1991, *The Unauthorized Version*, London: Viking; A. N. Wilson, 1992, *Jesus*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson; also sources cited in note 8 above.
23. J. Mayo, O. White, and H. J. Eysenck, 1978, "An empirical study of the relation between astrological factors and personality", *Journal of Social Psychology*, 105, 229-36.
24. Hans Eysenck and D. K. B. Nias, 1982, *Astrology: Science or Superstition?*, London.
25. A. N. Wilson, 1992, op. cit., pp. 73-86.
26. Luke 2:48, 49.
27. Nicholas Humphrey, 1987, "Folie à deux", *Guardian*, 8 April 1987. (The boy's name has been changed to preserve anonymity.)
28. Uri Geller, 1975, quoted by David Marks and Richard Kammann, 1980, *The Psychology of the Psychic*, p. 90, Buffalo: Prometheus Books; see also Uri Geller, 1975, *My Story*, New York: Praeger.
29. Arthur Koestler, 1952, *Arrow in the Blue: An Autobiography*, p. 36, New York: Macmillan.
30. Arthur Koestler, 1976, quoted by Adam Smith in *New York* magazine, 27 December 1976.
31. Uri Geller, quoted by Merrily Harpur, 1994, "Uri Geller and the warp factor", *Fortean Times*, 78, 34.
32. Cited by Martin Gardner, 1983, *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus*, p. 163, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
33. A good review is given in Robert Buckman and Karl Sabbagh, 1993, *Magic or Medicine?: An Investigation of Healing and Healers*, London: Macmillan.
34. Uri Geller, 1975, quoted by David Marks and Richard Kammann, 1980, op. cit., p. 92.
35. *ibid.*, pp. 107-9.
36. Psalm 22:1, 9-10.
37. Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1971, *The Idiot*, trans. David Magarshak, pp 446-447, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
38. See the final Chapter of Nicholas Humphrey, 1995, op. cit.