

Philosophy and Psychical Research with Jason Reza Jorjani

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(0:00:20) **JM:** Hello and welcome, I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today we are going to explore philosophy and psychical research, the study of the fringe phenomena of consciousness and how it has impacted philosophers throughout history. With me is Jason Reza Jorjani, who is a faculty member of the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Welcome, Jason.

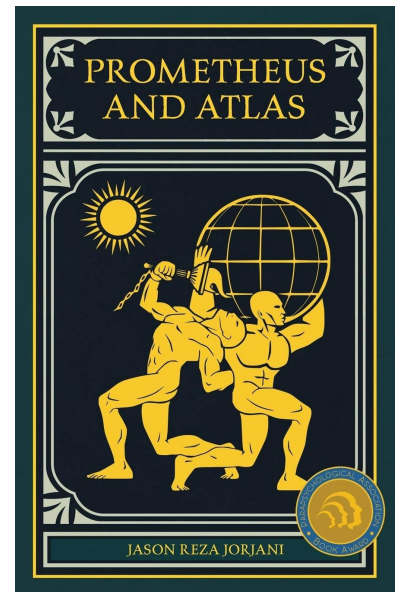
(00:00:46) **JRJ:** Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you, Jeffrey.

(00:00:48) **JM:** It's a pleasure to be with you too. When we think of psychical research, many people think of the British Society for Psychical Research founded about 1850, but actually philosophers have been interested in this area of exploration going back to the ancient Greeks.

(00:01:10) **JRJ:** That's right. The word psychical actually comes from the Greek "psukhe", which means both mind and soul. The Greek concept doesn't distinguish between the two. And an understanding of the soul, or the mind, as part of nature as a whole has been the central concern of philosophy since the very first philosopher. The first man that we know of to have called himself a philosopher was Pythagoras of Samos.

And, Pythagoras spent 22 years in Egypt studying with the priests of the Egyptian temples until he was arrested by the Persian army during their occupation of Egypt, and brought back to Babylon, the capital of the Persian Empire, where he studied Babylonian, astronomy, and the precursors of natural sciences in Babylon for another decade before returning to his native Greece. Instead of returning to the island of Samos where he was from he actually set up a school in a Greek colony in Italy. And, Plato who is widely regarded as the founder of Western philosophy became a member of the Pythagorean Order after the execution of Socrates. In Pythagoras's attempt to understand nature, all manner of what we now think of as psychical phenomena figure in prominently.

(00:02:42) **JM:** And, I suppose it's fair to say that in the ancient world these things were just matter of fact. There were temples and oracles and cults of every sort, people going into altered states of consciousness through numerous means. There were mystery schools and what we think of today as



sort of the exotic fringe phenomenon of consciousness, that in the ancient world were pretty mainstream.

(00:03:12) **JRJ:** Yes, but the significant point with Pythagoras was that because he had such an intense and prolonged exposure to the mythologies and religious worldviews of cultures other than his own and cultures whose religious views conflicted with one another, the Egyptian and the Persian, to take two examples. He was intent on understanding what the soul was in itself, apart from the prejudices and superstitions of the traditional cultures of the time. And so, this really is in that sense the beginnings of psychical research as a natural scientific approach to fathoming the nature of consciousness.

(00:03:59) **JM:** And, how in your view did Pythagoras define the soul? Or explain the soul?

(00:04:07) **JRJ:** Well, we don't have any writings directly from Pythagoras, but through Plato's school, the picture that we have is that for the Pythagoreans, there were three orders of reality: the natural world, what we've come to think of as the material world; an abstract order of being that can be grasped through mathematical thinking, and something in between that, a kind of imaginal world, a world where we have something like sensory perception. A dream world as it were that intermingles elements of abstract ideas with the kinds of sensory experiences, not just sight but also sound and touch, that we have in the material world. And the Pythagoreans, in particular, put a great deal of emphasis on the idea of reincarnation, which was alien to traditional Greek religion. So, they viewed the cultivation of the mind in some ways as a preparation for death and rebirth. Pythagoras himself is said to have lived many lifetimes.

(00:05:31) **JM:** To my understanding, of course we normally think of reincarnation as associated with the Hindu philosophers, but I believe that sort of came along later in Hindu philosophy. That Pythagoras perhaps preceded the philosophers of India.

(00:05:50) **JRJ:** That's possible. There are some writings that claim Pythagoras had made it all the way to India, but they are considered generally unreliable, so we don't know whether he arrived at this notion on his own. Some have suggested that the mystery school of Orpheus influenced this view in the Pythagorean order, but then again it just pushes the question further back.

(00:06:14) **JM:** Can we talk a bit about the Greek mystery schools. My understanding is that all the prominent citizens of ancient Greece were part of these traditions and at the same time they were sworn to secrecy about them.

(00:06:28) **JRJ:** Yes, well, the Pythagorean order adopted that practice from the mystery schools. And, the most important reason why it did so was because it had a political program. The Pythagorean order was actually the only place in the ancient world where women could receive an education equal to that

of men. And they had set up schools in southern Italy and they began to have such a degree of influence over policies in the various polis's, the various Greek city-states in that area, that eventually it provoked resentment from the traditional aristocracy who rallied the masses to eventually burn down the schools. And Pythagoras barely escaped with his life. These schools were re-founded throughout the Greco-Roman world. As I mentioned, Plato himself attended one of them. And, centuries after Plato's time Hypatia of Alexandria wound up being the director of the equivalent of a Platonic Pythagorean school in the Greek colony of Alexandrian Egypt. So, what began as a fringe educational movement, a fringe alternative educational movement, wound up by the end of the classical period becoming the educational establishment of the Greco-Roman world. Unfortunately, it was torched by Christian masses during the Christian takeover of the Greco-Roman Empire.

(00:08:11) **JM:** And Hypatia, as I understand it, may have been the leading scholar of her era.

(00:08:16) **JRJ:** She was the leading scholar of her era and an heir to the Pythagorean idea that, and Platonic idea, that there was no essential distinction between men and women in the intellectual realm.

(00:08:26) **JM:** And the mystery schools, as I studied them, emphasize the idea of inculcating through various ritual processes and probably altered states of consciousness an awareness of the eternity of the soul, that it survives physical death.

(00:08:46) **JRJ:** Yes, in some cases they would use natural caves, grottos in the countryside of Italy, essentially as sensory deprivation chambers. They had developed certain hallucinogenic compounds from natural plants, and they would try to understand the illusory nature of this world of experience that we're in by evoking equally captivating, virtual realities as it were, inside these grottoes. It's one of the practices that they used. And you see this influence Plato in *The Republic* in the allegory of the cave.

(00:09:31) **JM:** The idea that there is an inner reality which is more real and more profound than the ephemeral external world we perceive through our senses.

(00:09:42) **JRJ:** Yes, essentially, we are living in a world of shadows projected onto a cave wall. And we are really prisoners in this cave but have the capacity to liberate ourselves and perceive the true reality outside of it.

(00:09:56) **JM:** And, the true reality is something of a Platonic reality.

(00:10:01) **JRJ:** Yeah, this is the interesting thing in terms of the ark of psychical research and the history of philosophy. We begin with the psychical understood as something transcending the natural world and we end in thinkers like Bergson and William James with an understanding that our

mechanistic, materialistic model of the natural world is simply a framework that has practical significance and that the spiritual is not a separate order than the natural, that we are simply filtering super nature, as it were, in order to develop technologies that serve our purposes in one way or another, but that the spiritual world is this world.

(00:10:52) **JM:** Well, you jump forward about 2000 years to the era of Henri Bergson and William James, both of whom are great philosophers who are presidents of the British Society for Psychological Research. That's quite a leap forward. It didn't happen..

(00:11:12) **JRJ:** Well, the leap forward is across a fulcrum that really is epitomized by Rene Descartes, so essentially what we had with the Christianization of the Roman Empire was a need on the part of the church authorities to limit any speculation concerning the spiritual world. Now, this predominated for over 1000 years, and when in the early Renaissance, thinkers like Giordano Bruno began to raise similar questions as the Pythagoreans, independently from church dogma, they met with serious resistance. Even though Bruno, who is essentially for our purposes a neo-Pythagorean, neo-Platonic, thinker...

(00:12:07) **JM:** Who was burned at the stake as I recall...

(00:12:09) **JRJ:** Yes, despite having the backing of Henry III, the king of France to go to places such as Oxford University and lecture, in the end he was burned at the stake in a public market in Rome. So, the natural philosophers of the time got the idea that it would be better to try to understand the natural world without any references to the spiritual. So, what people often miss when they read Rene Descartes is the extent to which his framing of mind and matter as two completely distinct substances, where the mind is entirely abstract, and matter is conceived of in terms of pure extension, in terms of a homogenous grid of space-time, and conceived of mechanistically where all of the interactions of elementary particles have to obey mathematical laws. This radical dichotomy between a rather hollow conception of the mind, or a vacuous conception of the mind, and an entirely mechanistic natural world is motivated in part by a concern with the church not wanting people to speculate about the spiritual world.

(00:13:34) So, in Descartes' *Metaphysical Speculations*, he explicitly rules out a wide variety of psychical phenomena- clairvoyance, extrasensory perception, out of body experiences. He makes a great deal of the fact that if we were in waking life to have experiences with a dream-like quality we would know for certain that our senses have deceived us. And people take Descartes at his word when he makes these arguments, but in point of fact, he had paranormal experiences himself. In fact, his philosophical enterprise was in large part motivated by them. He kept a notebook of these experiences, in particular, a so-called night of dreams that he had where he was visited at his bedside by a demonic being and shown copper plate portraits in a book that happened to be brought over to the inn where he was staying the next day by a visiting painter. So, he had a precognitive dream. And,

so, Descartes knew that many of the things that he ruled out as impossible, in fact were genuine human experiences. And then there was the fact that letters have surfaced which suggest that Descartes was involved with the Rosicrucian order. This is very peculiar because Descartes had an orthodox Jesuit education and Descartes's personal publicist was one of the hammers of the Holy Inquisition.

(00:15:12) **JM:** The hammers?

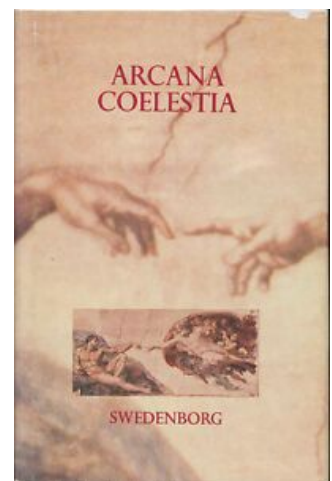
(00:15:13) **JRJ:** Yes, one of the hammers of the Holy Inquisition. These were the people who would bring down the gavel, as it were, with the verdict, "burn the witch." So, some researchers have speculated that rather than being a Rosicrucian, some people thought Descartes was a Rosicrucian, he was involved with these people, because he had been sent as a Jesuit spy to infiltrate the Rosicrucian order.

(00:15:38) **JM:** Perhaps we could define the Rosicrucian order a little bit in this era. We're talking, I think, 17th century or so?

(00:15:47) **JRJ:** We are talking, yes, the 1600's and the Rosicrucians... OK, so most people think of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation as an attempt to break away from Catholic dogma and elaborate divergent visions of Christianity. But, there was a neo-pagan strain in the Renaissance, and what some people meant by Protestant and General Reformation in that time period was a return to neo-pagan wisdom tradition. The Rosicrucians were not as explicit about that as Giordano Bruno was. But one can't blame them given what happened to Bruno. I think, though, that in fact they were essentially neo-pagans who were trying to resurrect the Pythagorean and Platonic approach to psychical phenomenon and nature in general.

(00:16:46) **JM:** And to some degree they played a role in ushering in what historians sometimes think of as the Age of Enlightenment.

(00:16:54) **JRJ:** Well, here's the thing. The Age of Enlightenment is grounded more on this dichotomy between an abstract mind and a materialistic and mechanistic nature which, Emmanuel Kant, who is the philosopher most commonly associated with the Enlightenment, he wrote this short essay read by nearly everyone, you know, in introductory philosophy course, "What is enlightenment?" Kant basically adopts Descartes mind-matter dualism. And Kant does that, in other words, Kant banishes this intermediary world, this imaginal world, he does that knowing full well that it's real. And we know this because Kant spent years in his youth reading the entirety of Emanuel Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia*.



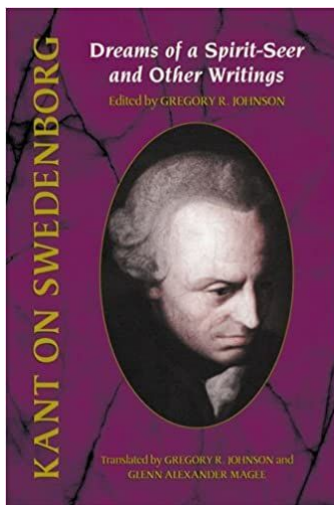
(00:17:47) **JM:** Swedenborg, being a scientist and also a mystic, a great Swedish founder of the Swedenborgian church.

(00:17:56) **JRJ:** Yes, and whose visions were predominantly concerned with this spectral world that is neither abstractly conceptual, abstractly intelligible nor material.

(00:18:11) **JM:** I think of it as the world of mythos, mythology, a very powerful archetypal interaction...

(00:18:20) **JRJ:** The archetypal reality...

(00:18:21) **JM:** Yeah, that shape in many ways who we are and help connect the human with the realm of the infinite.



(00:18:28) **JRJ:** And, so Kant studied Swedenborg very seriously, and rumors of this got out while he was still trying to attain tenure, this is in his early years as a professor. Out of fear that he would not attain tenure, he penned this rather disingenuous, somewhat sarcastic book, *Dreams of A Spirit-Seer*, the tone of which conflicts with its content. The tone is mocking of Swedenborg, but if you pay close attention to the content, you see that actually Kant thinks that there's a lot of worth in...

(00:19:10) **JM:** In fact, Kant made a study of an example of clairvoyance, in which Swedenborg predicted, or seemed to see clairvoyantly a fire in Gothenburg, a Swedish city hundreds of miles from the dinner party where the event occurred.

(00:19:28) **JRJ:** Yeah, Kant independently investigated some of the claims of Swedenborg's psychic abilities. And despite having - the other point that's very significant is - this is not incidental to the structure of Kant's thought. If you look at Kant's groundwork on the *Metaphysics of Morals*, probably his most famous work, the basic structure of that work is elaborated from out of the reflections of Swedenborg that you see in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. So, Swedenborg had a deep impact on Kant's development of this distinction between the phenomenal world and the numinal world, and a sort of moral republic in the numinal world. But, he interprets these ideas from Swedenborg in a dualistic, neo-Cartesian way that abstracts them.

(00:20:27) **JM:** Well, in the modern era, since the Renaissance, there's been a predominantly materialistic metaphysics in Western culture, I think that tended to suppress the exploration of consciousness and paranormal phenomenon associated with consciousness, yet many philosophers realized they had to grapple with these things.

(00:20:53) **JRJ:** Yeah, what happened essentially was that Descartes's and Kant's notions of the mental reality, the mental substance, were so vacuous, that natural philosophers in the generations after them decided that they could simply be done away with. Most prominently Julian Offray de la Mettrie, was a neo-Cartesian materialist who essentially laid the groundwork for the reductionist, biological explanation of the human mind, as nothing more than the brain interacting with other organs. This is significant because the people who set up the cult of reason during the French Revolution, who attempted to abolish traditional religion together with monarchy, and set up a scientific society, in the early years of the French Revolution, were avid readers of people like la Mettrie. And so indirectly, a kind of Cartesian mechanism wound up at the basis of a vision for reorganizing society, that failed precisely because people like Robespierre saw that it would leave the world without a moral foundation. So, then you have Robespierre set up his cult of the Supreme Being as a reaction against the cult of reason, which eventually led to the failure of the French Revolution and Napoleon's restoration of Catholicism.

(00:22:18) **JM:** Well, you have referred to more recent philosophers, Bergson and William James, who began to resurrect the idea of psychical research especially as being part of the natural order.

(00:22:32) **JRJ:** Yes, so we gained by losing. It's a kind of dialectical movement where you have Pythagorean and Platonic recognition of these as legitimate human experiences, but they are framed in a way that the psychical is a different order of experience than the mundanely material, and where our ordinary everyday world is a world of shadows. Then, you lose the psychical all together, and thinkers like Descartes and Kant, and the materialists in their wake. And then when its regained, like Bergson and James, there's an understanding that the materialism of someone like Descartes is really a reflection of our attempt to get a better handle on the world. As Bergson put it, there's a distinction between intellect and intuition and our technical intellect has come to predominate over intuition to the extent that it has atrophied. He foresaw a re-emergence of animal instinct, in the form of intuition, that would allow us to redevelop some of the psychical abilities that he thought we share in common with animals all the way down the rung of the evolutionary ladder.

(00:23:02) So, on this analysis, our modern scientific world pictures are really models that allow us to have a better grasp of the world and to inhabit the world more effectively, through technical development. And the mistake that we've made is to take them to be a mirror of nature. The element that's more significant in terms of James's thought is how the scientific approach to psychical phenomena impacts religious experience. James recognized that once you admit these are natural phenomena, there ought not be any categorical distinction between science and religion, and this is precisely what the church was afraid of when it burned Bruno at the stake - that Bruno represented the re-emergence of a neo- classical science that which not draw any ultimate distinction between science and spirituality.

(00:25:02) **JM:** And William James pretty much exemplified this. He's considered the founder of American psychology, the founder of American pragmatic philosophy, and as a president of the Society for Psychical Research, someone who advocated the application of empirical science to questions like life after death.

(00:25:26) **JRJ:** Yes, and one of the most striking features of his psychology of religion, is the idea that even if there are gods, even if there are superhuman beings, what they intend to do with us is not necessarily in our own interests. We ought to develop our capacities ourselves to the utmost and self-determine our course in life.

(00:25:51) **JM:** Thank you so much for being with me. It's been a pleasure covering about 2,500 years of human philosophical thought with you in the last 25 minutes or so. You've been very thoughtful and articulate in expounding the subtle threads of this history, and it's been a great pleasure for me.

(00:26:12) **JRJ:** Thank you Jeffrey for inviting me.

(00:26:14) **JM:** It's been wonderful to be with you. I look forward to interviewing you again. And thank you for being with us. (00:26:23)

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