

***Comments on Edgar Wunder: The Skeptics Syndrome
and Timm Grams: Skeptic Encounters Skeptical Movement***

***Kommentare zu Edgar Wunder: Das Skeptiker-Syndrom
und Timm Grams: Skeptiker trifft auf Skeptikerbewegung***

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Dogmatism in Science, and Dogmatic Cults of Scientism Self-described as Skeptical

In my opinion, Wunder’s 1998 description of “The Skeptic Syndrome” remains largely accurate. However, I do not see as independent his two dimensions, belief ↔ unbelief and dogmatism ↔ open-mindedness; I think belief entails dogmatism. I believe also that most if not all human beings inhabit some intermediate place between dogmatism and open-mindedness; full open-mindedness is impossible as a result of ingrained “knowledge” and beliefs. The difficulty – or impossibility! – of objectively assessing or re-assessing evidence is demonstrated by how rare it is to encounter people who experience changes of any personally significant belief.

An excellent point in Wunder’s retrospective is the desirability of avoiding “the term ‘scientific’, because I believe that in discussions it does not contribute to analytical clarity, but rather to confusion – considering its manifold and contradictory connotations”.

Indeed! “Science” and “scientific” are red-herring distractions in countless arguments: Instead of examining the evidence for and against a particular claim, advocates of the various positions argue with one another about who represents “science” and “scientific thinking”.

Another excellent point in the retrospective notes that the self-styled skeptics assume “that one can deal with almost any topic in a well-founded way because one’s ‘critical thinking’ quali-

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fies one to do so. What ‘skeptical’ movements deal with today, in this respect, goes far beyond the subject area of anomalistics”. Skeptics groups are nowadays essentially proponents of scientism on each and every question. They criticize not only those who take seriously such matters as parapsychology or cryptozoology but also those who differ in even the smallest respect with any majority consensus, say, over climate change.

In this respect, the skeptics groups reflect the modern tendency for mainstream science to afford dogmatic hegemony to contemporary consensuses, something I noted in 2004 (Bauer, 2004) and elaborated at book length in 2012 (Bauer, 2012). Thus anyone who questions whether carbon dioxide is really the prime cause of global warming and climate change is labeled “denialist”; anyone who questions the benefit-to-risk ratio of HPV vaccines is sweepingly condemned as a universal “anti-vaxxer”; and so on. A shocking contemporary illustration of the consequences is the manner in which the University of Keele has been pressured by journalistic attacks and innuendos into hindering the research of Christopher Exley into the biological effects of aluminum compounds (Greenfield, 2021).

The anonymous GWUP posting that misrepresented Wunder and his critique is sadly typical of fanatical defenders of orthodoxy. I experienced that after publishing articles (Bauer, 2003, 2005, 2006 a, b, c, d) and a book (Bauer, 2007) demonstrating that HIV is not the cause of AIDS: a graduate student in a group of mainstream activist defenders of the orthodoxy created a *Wikipedia* entry about me with misleading material drawn from a variety of my publications. (I also learned from this episode that correcting errors and misleading inferences on Wikipedia is essentially impossible for the person whose name is the title of the Wiki entry.)

The matters raised by Grams support the validity of Wunder’s discussions. The central, overarching point is that skepticism, as commonly understood, means agnosticism and not atheism; whereas the self-styled skeptics groups profess utter belief in anything accepted by contemporary mainstream science and utter disbelief of any claims that seem in any way not consonant with present-day scientific consensuses.

Group-think is a characteristic of all groups, but it is particularly strong among so-called skeptics, who also typically display the misguided “presumption that [they] can derive the ‘ought’ from the ‘is’”. Grams is again accurate in pointing to the problem of leadership in these groups, and that “[e]ven basically nice people can become a mob”. His description, “[t]he managing director of the association is a dogmatist and ideologically driving force”, reminded me of the behavior of Paul Kurtz at the CSICOP (“Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal”) conference I attended in 1983. Just a year earlier, I had participated in the founding Conference of the Society for Scientific Exploration (3–5 June, 1982, at College Park, Maryland) where the atmosphere had been collegial and enthusiastic, enhanced by such things as the distribution of a list of participants with contact information. No such list had been

distributed at the CSICOP conference. When I spoke to Kurtz about this, I was quite shocked by his equivocations, including claiming not to know that this is a common feature of professional conferences. He stated a need to obtain the permission of all individual participants before divulging this information, but promised in any case to send me a confidential copy – which never came. That is how I began to learn that, contrary to its official mission statement, CSICOP was not interested in “scientific investigation” or open-minded discussion and was not, as I had naively assumed, an organization similar to the Society for Scientific Exploration.

My only serious point of disagreement with Grams is in his liking of Karl Popper’s approach to evaluating science. Falsifiability as a criterion of proper science was discarded long ago by philosophy of science. It is true, however, as Grams says, that “Popper’s demarcation criterion still plays the main role in the thinking of the vast majority of skeptics”. That is true of many other pundits, not only skeptics. Arguments over such issues illustrate profusely how many people feel free to hold forth about what science is and what it should be even when they have little if any background knowledge of the pertinent literature in philosophy of science and Science & Technology Studies.

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