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Smoke and Mirrors: Reflections on the Skeptical Agenda

The contributions in this issue by Wunder and Grams give a fascinating insight into the skeptical movement in Germany. I have no direct experience of the GWUP so am not in a position to comment on its accuracy. Neither can I comment on its position with respect to religious belief and practice. However, there are aspects of this portrayal that resonate with my own experience of the wider skeptical position toward parapsychology, particularly among its appointed spokespersons, that may be worth sharing here.

Wunder's thesis is that GWUP is underpinned by a fixed ideological disbelief system rather than true skepticism. The latter entails a suspension of prior beliefs so as to evaluate a particular claim on its empirical merits, which should be the bedrock of scientific practice. True skepticism is, by definition, a position of doubt that privileges unbiased but critical thinking, and a careful consideration of the evidence put forward for a particular claim. It is encouraging that Wunder's "skeptics syndrome" is not characterized by dogmatism, but can range from open-mindedness to dogmatism; however, the examples he cites of the behavior of gatekeepers within the organization seem very much to favor the latter. It is quite shocking to read, for example, how deciding on which speakers to invite to a conference and in what order to schedule them should be done in such a way as to minimize doubt among the membership about the accepted view. It goes without saying that this is unlikely to encourage healthy critical debate. Instead, he describes an Orwellian groupthink mentality that discourages disagreement, even to the extent of perpetuating demonstrably false claims rather than to allow inconsistency to creep in. This strategy seems to have extended even to GWUP's reaction to publication of "The Skeptics Syndrome", with Wunder's departure from the organization being described (and re-described) in terms that reminded me of the propaganda effort that follows Snowball's disappearance from *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945).

True scepticism, then, depends on a willingness to engage with claims one is suspicious of, sifting through the evidence that is offered for them in a systematic and critical way so as to show that the findings can be accounted for in some other way (as artefact or error; perhaps even fraud) or that the claim does not necessarily follow even if the evidence is accepted as

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valid. But Wunder observes that skeptics have little familiarity with the literature and are not motivated to reduce their ignorance. This has been my experience even among the spokespeople of the skeptical movement. I have recently been interested to evaluate skeptics' objections to current practices and findings in parapsychology, to see if they might provide constructive insights for future developments (Roe, 2017, 2019, in press). Sadly, they have not. I have been dismayed by the lack of familiarity among even the highest profile commentators concerning the kind of research that has been conducted in parapsychology over the last quarter century.⁵ Whole swathes of activity have been completely ignored, and historical objections have been recycled with no attempt to tie them to current research designs. Instead we have to do with vague allusions to poor quality and inconsistent outcomes. Where particular lines of research are referred to they are typically distorted or represented in caricature; for example, Shermer (2010: 154–155) writes (in a chapter entitled, with no awareness of the irony, “The devil is in the details”),

under controlled conditions *remote viewers have never succeeded in finding a hidden target with greater accuracy than random guessing* ... the occasional successes you hear about are due either to chance or suspect experimental conditions, such as when the person who subjectively assesses whether the remote viewer's narrative description seems to match the target already knows the target location and its characteristics. When both the experimenter and remote viewer are blinded to the target, *my analysis of the literature* indicates that psychic powers vanish. [my emphasis]

Of course, no particular studies are cited in this parodic review since it is unthinkable that any of the published research by parapsychologists such as Russ Targ, Robert Jahn, or Marilyn Schlitz could possibly be so naively designed as to not be double blinded; and indeed, even a cursory perusal of this literature disproves the claim. In the circumstances, the idea that Shermer's conclusions are based on a thorough review of evidence is unpersuasive, to say the least.

This tendency to avoid engaging with the specifics of individual studies and their particular findings seems to me a common trait of contemporary skeptical commentaries, and reflects I think an effort to protect one's skeptical theory in the face of increasingly challenging contrary evidence (reminiscent of Thomas Huxley's [1870] complaint that the great tragedy of Science is the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact). It reaches its zenith in Reber and Alcock's

5 Grams singles out Ray Hyman as an “Upright warrior” who still adheres to transparent scientific methods and the tools of critical thinking in his evaluations. Unfortunately, that has not been my experience. Hyman's work in the 1980s was characterized by scrupulous attention to detail and evidence-based criticism, but it is clear that he has not kept up to date with the literature and now has little of relevance to say, relying instead on tired sweeping statements and rhetorical devices in place of informed criticism.

(2020) rejoinder to an article by Cardeña (2018) that offered a strong case for psi phenomena, based on experimental evidence accumulated to date. Rather than subject the data described by Cardeña, or the methods used to produce them, to any close scrutiny, Reber and Alcock assert (p. 1),

Claims made by parapsychologists cannot be true. The effects reported can have no ontological status; the data have no existential value [...] Hence, data that suggest that they can are necessarily flawed and result from weak methodology or improper data analyses or are Type I errors.

Thus, they claim on theoretical grounds that our understanding of the processes of nature is sufficiently complete for us to be able to dismiss whole classes of observations as erroneous, and so can avoid the tedious matter of having to deal with actual evidence. This is a bold strategy, which depends on the reader subscribing to some form of naturalism along the lines described by Grams in this issue. As Grams writes, “both the theist and the naturalist can fall prey to the illusion of being in possession of the truth. In this case he occasionally refers to the ‘unchangeable laws of nature’ and forgets that he does not even know the laws of nature postulated by him. Postulating their invariance belongs to the assumptions which cannot be tested.” Of course, the progress of science is one of the greatest triumphs of human civilization, enabling us to improve enormously our mastery of (and stewardship over) the natural world. But that progress is not evenly distributed across the sciences, and our understanding of social and psychological phenomena (especially concerning what it is to be a conscious experiencing entity) are still in their infancy. Unfortunately, those many successes (including the medical response to the covid pandemic) seem to have bred an attitude of hubris that has not been tempered by the many failures of psychology and sociology to establish anything resembling laws or principles. (I have commented on psychology’s replication issues in Roe, 2016.) It is clear that the object of study becomes progressively less amenable to exact prediction and less susceptible to explanation in terms of fixed laws as the degree of sentience or intentionality of that object increases. As a consequence, it remains far from obvious how phenomena associated with consciousness might be reducible to (and must necessarily be consistent with) understandings that are derived wholly from physics or chemistry. Given this great uncertainty, it seems untenable to proscribe certain claimed experiences or capacities as a priori impossible because they are apparently in conflict with classical physics.

Grams draws on Popper’s notion of unfalsifiability as a demarcation criterion of the pseudosciences among the skeptical community, though acknowledges that many “strange ideas”, such as astrology and homeopathy, would pass this test. What matters is not so much whether a statement is unfalsifiable per se, but rather whether it has been subjected to empirical test and if so what happens if such tests are negative. Admittedly, parapsychology has an ambivalent rela-

tionship with falsification, with very few examples of the abandonment of a particular model or theory after failing to confirm predictions derived from it, and understandably this can be seen as suspicious by skeptical commentators. While far from ideal, in this respect parapsychology is similar to other areas of the social sciences in having predictions that reflect not just the theory under scrutiny but also a constellation of background assumptions, so that any unexpected result can be attributed to one or other element of the constellation in order to salvage the theory (a form of the Duhem-Quine thesis). The discussion sections of published papers are replete with examples of such repair work, and can represent a legitimate response to a surprising outcome that requires explanation. For example, one might acknowledge that effect sizes from individual experiments are susceptible to sampling error such that they only approximate the real-world effect to a degree that is dependent on the size of the real-world effect and the “power” of this particular study design to effectively capture it. A relatively small real-world effect might be detected with high fidelity in high powered experiments (typically with large samples and highly validated instruments for measuring the effect), but with low-powered studies we might expect to see large numbers of apparent failures to replicate that actually only reflect Type II errors. Meta-analyses that combine results across a range of experiments can be very helpful in determining if this is the case, and argue against treating individual failures as refutations.

In contrast, as Wunder notes, despite the claimed importance of independent replication and falsification attempts in order to test dubious claims, there is little appetite among skeptics to conduct experiments of their own. They may allude to failures of neutral investigators to reproduce claimed “paranormal” effects, but are hard pressed to provide many examples of them. Similarly, one of the standard strategies of scepticism is to “speculate” that experimenter error or fraud may be responsible for the positive findings in parapsychology, and while this speculation may be specific enough to be falsifiable in principle, very little effort is made to actually test the claim so that it becomes an unscientific one. This aversion to conducting research seems to be a legacy of the unusual relationship that exists between advocates and counteradvocates in parapsychology. As Honorton (1993: 193) explained,

Controversies in science normally occur between groups of researchers who formulate hypotheses, develop research methods, and collect empirical data to test their hypotheses. When disputes arise over the interpretation of experimental findings, or when critics suspect the findings were caused by artifacts, they design new experiments to test alternative explanations or the impact of suspected artifacts. It is through this process that scientific controversies are resolved. In contrast, the psi controversy is largely characterized by disputes between a group of researchers, the parapsychologists, and a group of critics who do not do experimental research to test psi claims or the viability of their counterhypotheses. Psi critics argue the plausibility of various alternative hypotheses (or the implausibility of the psi hypothesis) but they rarely feel obliged to test them.

While skeptics remain unwilling or incapable of conducting empirical work to substantiate the claims they make regarding “paranormal” claims, parapsychologists will be justified in dismissing their criticisms of the extant research as thinly veiled rhetoric.

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