Authors' responses:

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Evaluation of Theses in the Commentaries

In the following, I will try to identify on which of the issues that I consider important I disagree with some commentators.

(1) Several contributions use the terms "skeptic" or "skepticism" in an essentialist way - as if they had an "actual" or "true" meaning. When "skeptics" organizations then fail this "proper" meaning in their practice, they are accused of "pseudo-skepticism", as already in Truzzi (1987). I do not consider such a dressing up of the controversy to be useful, like any essentialism. Terms have no "true" meanings and there is no "right" or "wrong" meaning of the term "skeptic". To begin with, the term is nothing more than an empty phrase. If certain organizations use it as a self-designation, we should be careful in view of the multiple and contradictory connotations. As analyzing observers, we should not ascribe a meaning that goes beyond the mere self-designation, and this is precisely the reason why I always put "skeptics" organizations in inverted commas: they call themselves that, that is all that is meant by it, the inverted commas indicate that. In my opinion, this avoids superfluous debates about whether they are "real" skeptics that do not yield any insights. If we all otherwise consistently refrained from using the term "skepticism" / "skeptic", it would be possible to express what is meant analytically more clearly, more directly and with fewer misunderstandings. I myself already declared in writing a quarter of a century ago (Wunder, 1996) – several years *before* I left the GWUP – that I am certainly *not* a "skeptic" and do not claim the term for myself.

(2) I am astonished by the misunderstanding of Mark Benecke and René Gründer, who apparently believe that the contributions by Timm Grams and myself are about the relationship between "skeptics" organizations and "anomalists". But that is not the subject of the contributions at all. Such a relationship is certainly not constitutive for "skeptics" organizations and would therefore hardly contribute anything to their understanding. The statements made for "sceptics" organizations apply completely independently of the existence of "anomalistics". Incidentally, neither Timm Grams nor I are "anomalists". We have never called ourselves such. Both original contributions were also written independently of organizational structures of anomalistics. I understand the term "anomalistics" merely as a designation for a certain thematic field of research, comparable, for example, to the term "American studies". Personal designations

that go beyond this, such as "anomalists", are unnecessary and I reject them because they could easily fall into the same questionable waters as the term "skeptic", namely mutate into identity-forming empty formulas for certain groups. To regard anomalistics and the "sceptic" movement as "siblings" (Benecke) or "hostile brothers" (Gründer) is, in my opinion, another misconception that can only arise from a superficial view. De facto, the personal, structural as well as historical lines of connection between anomalistics and the "sceptic" movement are far too weak to make such an assessment appear viable. The reason for this error is probably the assumption that, despite different "approaches" or references to different "fields of meaning", at least the topics and subject area, and in some cases the goals, of anomalistics and the "skeptics" movement are the same. But this does not stand up to scrutiny. As I have tried to show, the subject matter of the "skeptics" movement in its self-understanding (general advocates of "critical thinking") is ultimately unlimited and therefore infinitely larger than the subject matter of anomalistics; conversely, many subjects of anomalistics do not in fact elicit any resonance or interest within the "skeptics" movement. So there can be no question of a common subject area. The respective goals are also not only different, but ultimately incompatible at the core. "Skeptics" movements are, as Ulrich Magin has put it in a nutshell, simply lobbyists outside the science game, driven by ideology and on all kinds of topics. This has nothing to do with anomalistics, and no relevant insights about the "skeptics" movement are gained by attempting to find connections.

(3) René Gründer calls the "world view" of the "skeptics" movement "historical-materialist" and draws comparisons with Marxist scientism in GDR times. This goes too far terminologically and factually. The term "historical-materialist worldview" is usually reserved for very specific Marxist ideologems that are almost universally not shared in the "skeptics" movement. We should therefore not use such terms, they are misleading. The ideological roots of the "skeptics" movement do not lie in Marxism. Although I agree with René Gründer that the "skeptics" organizations represent a scientistic-progressive and political-activist movement, this does not mean, contrary to Gründer's assumption, that they somehow belong to the "politically left spectrum" and that "politically right-wing currents" or "biologistic social Darwinist" views are not to be found there. Such elements do indeed exist there. The scientistic belief in progress of the "skeptics" movement is also compatible with right-wing conservative-reactionary positions, and they also occur in its ranks. The positions against the German nuclear phase-out and the relativization of anthropogenic climate change mentioned in the articles are already perceptible indications of this from an external perspective.

(4) To try to derive the "skeptics" movement's understanding of science from the so-called "positivism dispute" in German sociology in the 1960s, as Gründer suggests, is misleading. Quite apart from the fact that Dahrendorf's position at the time is undisputed today, that the rivals in the "positivism dispute" at the time hopelessly talked past each other and that this fruitless dispute was about anything but positivism, it can be stated: the orientation and prac-

tice manifested in the "skeptics" movement has no noteworthy content-related interfaces with Adorno or his "critical theory", and Popper's position in the "positivism dispute" does not correspond to that of the "skeptics" movement either. If all that was meant was that a normative position was being advocated, then both Adorno and Popper argued normatively in their own way at the time, and Adorno was ultimately closer to positivism (if the term is to make any sense) than Popper. This can be shown quite easily with a critical reading of the texts. Incidentally, normative as well as positivist elements can be detected both in the "skeptics" movement and in its critics. In this respect, a reference to the historical "positivism controversy in German sociology", which played no role at all outside the German-speaking world, is rather confusing here and in no way productive.

(5) Dean Radin, Harald Walach, Timm Grams and others criticise in particular a worldview emerging in the "skeptics" movement, which they characterise with terms such as "materialism", "reductionism", "naturalism", "atheism" and the like. In this regard, my view is that I do not consider the worldview meant by these terms to be fundamentally problematic, even in the context of science. On the contrary, seen purely in terms of the history of science, such worldviews have proven to be tremendously productive and successful heuristically. What I consider problematic is merely an absolutisation and (usually unreflected) equation with "scientificity" per se, which leads to alternative worldviews no longer being able to throw their equally existing heuristic potential into the balance of research processes and thus effectively hinders research. This tendency is very tangible in the "skeptics" movement and is to be criticized. The movement is, as I said, at its core a worldview community acting as a lobby group.

(6) Such ideological narrowing with anti-pluralistic consequences for the toleration of certain research could, however, only be at least contained by epistemic modesty as the most important factor for the emergence of tolerance. Such tolerance, however, as Gasser (2020) has recently pointed out, can only arise under certain psychological and social conditions that are simply not structurally present within "skeptics" organizations. The social function of the "skeptics" movement to stabilise and perpetuate the disbelief systems of its members and sympathisers (hence the deliberate discursive closure when questioned) is ultimately incompatible with the cultivation of serious openness and appreciation for dissenters. Philosophical arguments alone cannot generate such tolerance, according to Gasser (2020). Therefore, René Gründer's idea of using simulation theory or "new realism" to find philosophical concepts to solve the discursive self-blockade of the "skeptics" movement is terribly naive. It misses the point of the problem. The proposal psychologically fails to recognise the character of disbelief systems; they do not depend on a consistent, reflected philosophical model and cannot be irritated by it. Incidentally, the proposal is also quite unsociological in that it erroneously believes that philosophical models can be used to break social structures and dynamics.

(7) I understand Mark Benecke as saying that he does not want to deal with the whole problem area of the social phenomenon of the "skeptics" movement because he believes this is superfluous through "unbiased testing" and "assumption-free measurement" – so that social contexts can be ignored. This is naive empiricism in an incredibly unreflective form. Of course, "measurement" without theoretical presuppositions is not possible at all, observations are always already theory-laden, and social contexts provide for this "charge", which therefore cannot be ignored under any circumstances.

(8) René Gründer believes he recognizes "conversion accounts" in the observations by me and Timm Grams. He sees it as a problem that it is "the authors' own experience" and calls for a sociological investigation "from the outside" by "actors not personally involved in conflict", a content-analytical evaluation of "materials" of the "skeptics" movement such as "journals/publications/online forums". In my opinion, there can be no such thing as a "God's eye perspective" hovering above things, just as there can be no investigation without "authors' own experience". Demands for this are not a meaningful methodological goal, because they cannot be achieved. Nor do I consider "being involved in conflict" to be methodologically harmful per se, because - at least in my understanding - a fruitful and pointed analysis always includes criticism, and is thus "conflictual". Don't be afraid of criticism and conflicts, they are the salt in the soup of the science game! If certain groups as objects of investigation are themselves markedly "conflictual" vis-à-vis their environment (as is undoubtedly the case with the "skeptics" movement), then a demand for conflict-avoiding "neutrality" is all the more unhelpful because it seriously limits both the possible methodological research approaches and the practical relevance of the results. I agree with Adorno *and* Popper that "neutrality" in general does not represent a meaningful methodological maxim, is actually never achievable (unless as a self-deception), which is why both always took sides vigorously and were not reticent with evaluative judgements. Rather incidentally, at least my text "The Skeptics Syndrome" is not a "conversion account" because it does not describe any conversion at all and – as I explained in the postscript – there also was no conversion experience. The process described by Berger and Luckmann, to which I referred in the postscript, is not a "conversion" in the usual sense, at least in the sociology of religion, because no "change of denomination" took place – as already mentioned above, I was neither a "skeptic" before nor an "anomalist" afterwards, but it is about a "role play with subjective distance", according to Berger and Luckmann. The set of characteristics of the "skeptics syndrome" was the content-analytically obtained result of a systematically conducted data collection and evaluation in the period February 1997 to March 1998, completed long before my termination of membership in the GWUP in 1999. What is of central importance, however, is something else: Do researchers who have a minimum of institutional independence from the "skeptics" movement arrive at essentially converging assessments when analyzing it as a social movement, regardless of their social position? This question can clearly be answered in the affirmative,

because the studies from other perspectives desired by Gründer have long existed; I have referenced some of them in the bibliography to my postscript. However, the idea that the analysis of "publications" of the "skeptics" movement is a royal road to their understanding is certainly not tenable, because their external communication often differs quite considerably from their internal communication. Both Stephan Matthiesen in his commentary and I have pointed this out with many examples. However, internal communication is crucial for a good understanding of the movement, and this is not accessible to researchers "from the outside".

(9) Stephan Matthiesen takes as his starting point the graph contained in "The Skeptics Syndrome" with the two axes "belief/disbelief" vs. "openness/dogmatism" and asks for empirical data to "clarify in which areas in the graph a general population or 'skeptics' or other groups fall". Such data were collected by me in 1999 in collaboration with Axel Becker, but not published. At that time, people were invited to participate in an automated online survey which, in addition to a battery of items on belief in "the paranormal" (the version of the "Paranormal Belief Scale" commonly used at the time), also contained a scale for measuring dogmatism as a personality trait, which was well established in differential psychology (without this being apparent to the participants). Participation in the survey was successfully advertised in various internet forums and on the GWUP mailing list. The characteristic "being a GWUP member" was also queried during participation. The result showed exactly what was already assumed in the graph included in "The Skeptics Syndrome": The population of GWUP "skeptics" showed extremely high values with low dispersion for disbelief in the paranormal, but an inconspicuous mean value with wide dispersion on the scale for general dogmatism. In the dimension "openness/dogmatism" the GWUP "sceptics" did not differ significantly from the general Internet population at that time, while the difference in "paranormal (dis)belief" was considerable. This corresponded exactly to the theoretical expectations formulated in "The Skeptics Syndrome". A correlation between general dogmatism and "paranormal belief" was not found. However, a problem that was not pursued further at the time is: Is "general dogmatism" as a personality trait really appropriate here from a theoretical point of view, or would it not be better to measure sectoral dogmatism specifically in relation to "paranormal"?

(10) The history of the "sceptic" movement is conceived by Timm Grams as a narrative of decay: "noble intentions" were the "original intentions", but the increasing moving away from the "roots" led to a "departure of some founding members" (among them I am also named). But this does not apply to me personally, and in my opinion it does not apply in general either. I have never shared such a diagnosis of degeneration. Despite all the changes that have taken place over the decades, the "projects", the "intentions" and the structural problems of the "skeptics" movement identified in "The Skeptics Syndrome" were at their core exactly the same at the time of their foundation as they are today. This can already be seen from the fact that the very first critics right after its foundation (see my bibliography to the postscript) pointed out the same problems as I and Timm Grams did

later. In my postscript I quoted the founding document of the "skeptics" movement – in it all the structural problems of the "skeptics" movement are already contained in a nutshell. The "skeptics" movement did not degenerate, but had a problematic orientation from the beginning.

(11) Closely related to this is the question of the potential "reformability" of the "skeptics" movement to resolve these problems. Such reformability I would decidedly deny for the structural reasons outlined in "The Skeptics Syndrome". In contrast, Grams writes: "I consider the skeptical movement to be reformable. At least that is my hope." He sees his hope nourished by the fact that a change in the statutes, which he had criticised, was only partially carried out, and that since his criticism of "boundary transgressions" by GWUP chairman Amardeo Sarma, who had promoted nuclear power plants in GWUP publications, nothing more has been published on the subject. To this I say: "Hopes" are not a good argument in such questions. There are social structures that in principle – for well understandable theoretical reasons – cannot be reformed, except by dissolution and collapse. Leninist totalitarian states are an example of this. Such political systems cannot be transformed into "democratic socialism" or liberal democracies, they can only collapse systemically. The theoretical reasons for this are demonstrable and quite compelling. In the text "The Skeptics Syndrome", *structural* reasons are listed (i. e. not dependent on individual attitudes or decisions of individuals or the composition of the leadership clique), which in my opinion logically compellingly lead to the fact that "skeptics" organizations can only "peacefully go to sleep" due to inactivity (this has happened in some cases) or possibly collapse due to internal conflicts, but it is structurally quasi impossible (and has never happened since the foundation of the "skeptics" movement, an empirical argument!) that a "skeptics" organization transforms itself in such a way that it eliminates the problems outlined in the "The Skeptics Syndrome", which would require the elimination of their cause, namely by accepting numerous "paranormal believers" as members and counterweights (but why should they join?) while at the same time a large part of the more dogmatic members leave, whereby a sharp fault line is pre-formed. Such a constellation would shatter the social community from the bottom up and lead to identity and organizational collapse, no matter what the leadership structure. A replacement of the leadership clique, as Grams envisages, would therefore not solve the basic problem at all. I cannot see any theoretical-argumentative invalidation of why my argumentation for structural non-reformability presented in "The Skeptics Syndrome" is not valid. Amendments to the statutes or redefinitions of terms do not change the situation, because the composition of the membership remains the same and the vast majority of them are not interested in questions of statutes and definitions. As if in mockery of Gram's hope, an extensive article by GWUP chairman Amardeo Sarma has now appeared again in issue 1/2021 of the GWUP magazine *Skeptiker*, in which he once again promotes nuclear power plants, presents the German nuclear phase-out as irrationalism and the Fukushima disaster as harmless and not dangerous. Of course, only his own view is "science-oriented and fact-based", other positions are dismissed as "myths" in a remarkably superficial manner. So it's business as usual.

(12) In connection with the "skeptics" movement, Timm Grams and also René Gründer still express the hope for a "socio-political corrective to educate about the risks of inappropriate promises of salvation" or for a "contact point with the goal of education in the sense of critical thinking". But I don't think that is at all the function that the "skeptics" movement – apart from propagandistic self-deception and deception of others – could ever adequately fulfil or has ever adequately fulfilled. This can be done much better by the specialist scientists on the respective topic, especially since their differentiated pluralism of opinion, which almost always exists, is less easy to level ideologically if there is no organization upstream that has fallen prey to the hubris of wanting to sort out everything that does not fit into its own world view. The "skeptics" movement is therefore, in my opinion, a misconstruction from the outset, also in the sense of such a goal. I am not merely criticizing any "admixtures", "boundary transgressions" or "deviations" from a noble goal, but I am criticizing the conception of the goal itself. The way the "skeptics" movement conceived this goal and its role in it from the very beginning, it could only go wrong and had to end in a denunciatory ideological package.

(13) The question of whether falsifiability should be a criterion for defining something as "scientific" is, in my view, irrelevant in the context of a critical analysis of the "skeptics" movement. The question would presumably have been of little interest to Popper, the supposed key witness, because Popper always despised debates about definitions of terms as irrelevant and essentialist. It is not what is to be called "scientific" that is exciting or relevant, but rather whether falsifiability (in a relative sense, for there is no final falsification any more than there is absolute verification) is something desirable in a concrete dispute about theories and theses. Most of the time, yes, I would say. But sometimes other things are more important and falsifiability is dispensable in order to pursue a matter as worthwhile. So you don't have to make a dogma out of it.

(14) The tendency of the GWUP, as impressively demonstrated in Stephan Matthiesen's commentary, to evade any criticism of itself in both internal and external communication ("siege mentality") has struck again in this case. GWUP officials did not take the opportunity to comment on our contributions, despite being invited to do so.

(English translation by Stephan Matthiesen)

References

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