

Editorial

Miracles, Anomalies, Anxiety and Paradigms

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Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes „concern“; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.

I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist. Why do we suffer? From too little: from channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient. There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude, to prevent “bad” information from invading and suffocating the “good.” Rather, we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings.

Michel Foucault, *The Masked Philosopher*¹

When something clever is well stated, there is no need to reformulate it. It is probably for this reason that the two historians Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, who wrote a ingenious and exciting work with *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (Daston & Park, 1998), provided the longer quote from Michel Foucault (1926–1984) at the beginning of their work. Informally, it addresses various facets of the major theme of their book, which deals with the attraction of the miraculous and the extraordinary as well as with the motives for the devotion to or rejection of the preoccupation with them, and their function in creating an “order of nature.” Aristotle considered the “passion of wonder” as the “beginning of philosophy”, as the authors write, but such curiosity about the phenomena of nature was disregarded by the 13th century scholastic philosophers (1998: 120ff.). They devalued acquisition of knowledge through observation of nature and experience aiming at conferring “on the natural philoso-

1 Foucault (1989: 198–199) quoted from Daston & Park (1998: 9). I would like to thank Heiner Schwenke for bringing this book to my attention. It has been sitting unread in my bookcase for years.

pher (together with the theologian and master of theoretical medicine) a virtual monopoly on absolute certainty” (ibid.: 121). In addition, Augustine saw curiosity as a form of reprehensible lust and thus sinful. The urge for knowledge about hidden natural connections endangered the concentration on the devotion to God (ibid.: 123–124).

Augustine’s great influence made it difficult for subsequent naturalists to justify their interest. This was especially true for the examination of the extraordinary. Differentiated views of the miraculous were made early on. For example, a distinction was made between what is extraordinary because of its rarity, what is considered extraordinary as a divine sign, what is miraculous because of “occult” qualities or powers, and the supernatural, divine miracle. In addition, there was the Aristotelian view that the regularity and order of nature was in itself the wonderful.

These discussions touch on the core area of anomalistics, the scientific study of anomalies that do not fit into the known “order of the world” accepted by mainstream science. For our questions, the science policy aspect of Daston and Park’s historical view is of interest, namely, what ought or is allowed to be researched and for what reason. From the point of view of an understanding of science as a symbolic form of access to the world, as understood by the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), there are no restrictions on the object domain as long as the objects are *in principle* accessible for research (Cassirer, 1944); the thirst for knowledge and the desire to structure the seemingly chaotic world and to create order is part of the “basic equipment” of humans and is not tied to specific objects.

Wherever we encounter devaluation, ridicule or even bans on research efforts, the causes for this are not to be found in science itself. Augustine’s assignment of scientific curiosity to human vices, the disdain for empirical observation of nature by scholastic philosophers and theologians, and the characterization of parapsychology as “pseudoscience” by contemporary skeptics indicate that such forms of criticism and rejection are often driven by ideology and theological convictions. The themes of power and anxiety are closely linked to this. As is well known, scientific knowledge gains at the institutional level can threaten interpretive sovereignty – Daston and Park spoke of the scholastics’ striving for the monopoly on absolute certainty (see above). It is therefore about the “enforcement and safeguarding of a binding order of reality” (Mayer et al., 2015: 9), which can express itself in many different ways – in relation to science, for example, also in the area of research funding.

But fear can also be a motive for preventing research. In addition to the fear of losing power, which is complementary to the striving for power,² it is also the fear of the uncanny (Freud, 1947), the inexplicable and the anomalous that may prevent a serious examination of the realm

2 To give a concrete example, this may be the fear of the orthodox medicine or the pharmaceutical industry of successful alternative medical approaches that would entail economic losses.

of the paranormal. For example, taking seriously the experimenter effect and the possibility of psi effects occurring, shakes the seemingly solid ground of all experimental science. Where there was unquestioned methodological certainty, questions arise. On a personal level, the idea that mind reading or psychokinesis is possible and that UFOs actually exist can be deeply unsettling and, if experienced, result in ontological or existential shock (Mack, 1994; Schäfer, 2012; Young & Goulet, 1994).

Daston and Park show impressively that it is the “miracles” that determine the order of nature. Seen from a broader perspective as anomalies, miracles are also crucial to scientific progress. By analogy with the extraordinary and miracles, one should also distinguish between different forms of anomalies. Sturrock (2010) differentiates between “OK anomalies”, “not-OK anomalies” and “sleeping anomalies”, whereby mainstream scientists have no problems with the former as they understand them to be solvable within the framework of conventional scientific models. In contrast, this does not seem to be the case with the “not-OK anomalies”, and it is uncertain whether the “sleeping anomalies” allow any scientific access at all (cf. Hövelmann, 2015). It goes without saying that the assignment of anomalies to categories 2 or 3 depends on the beliefs and world models held in each case. The concept of “scientability” introduced by Weymayr, which was addressed in my last editorial, as well as the skeptical comment by Reber and Alcock (2020) on Cardeña’s review article on parapsychological research (Cardeña, 2018), also mentioned there, show with their implicit “prohibition of research” a great similarity to the anti-scientific theology of Augustine and the dogmatics of scholastic natural philosophers who wanted to exclude the extraordinary and miraculous from the research program or at least disdained it. For “ideological skeptics,” “not-OK anomalies” and “sleeping anomalies” have no ontological reality and have congealed into “evidence” of credulity and false beliefs.

Even within parapsychology and anomalistics, you can see dogma applied to methods and models and the worthwhile research objects derived from them. My lecture “Open up the field – broaden the horizon” (Mayer, 2022) advocates a reflexive conceptualization to the research field and an openness to unorthodox approaches. I referred to Paul Feyerabend’s (1976) conclusion “Anything goes” from his investigations into the historical development of scientific knowledge. Inquisitiveness, curiosity and also disrespect for scientific dogmas are good prerequisites for gaining knowledge, especially in the area of the unexpected.

At this point, I would like to refer once again to the historian of science Lorraine Daston, who in a short lecture emphasized the unpredictability of scientific progress, which suddenly makes what today seems nonsensical appear in a whole new light.³ In an interview, she spoke of how science, especially in some sub-disciplines such as the biomedical field, has given the

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPSa4Ub8FU8>

impression that it can offer a kind of certainty of knowledge. “That kind of certainty is not compatible with scientific progress,” Daston said. “[...] Science has to be able to communicate its results with uncertainty. That’s the dynamic of modern science. It is the great advantage of modern science that there is progress, but this requires a new concept of truth. [...] Science must be able to translate such uncertainty. Uncertainty does not mean ignorance.”⁴

Many scientists active around 1900 believed that the great discoveries had now been made and that all that remained was to paint details in the big picture of nature. They were wrong, as we all know. A great scientific revolution, a paradigm shift was imminent. The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996) described such processes of upheaval in his groundbreaking book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

One of the results of my media-analytical longitudinal study of press coverage on anomalistic topics in the leading German media *DER SPIEGEL* and *BILD* (Mayer, 2004) consisted in uncovering certain strategies that the editorial staff of *DER SPIEGEL* regularly used to ridicule the topics along with the scientific effort to explore them. For decades, this also applied to the phenomenon of UFOs and their research. Although my study only covered the period from 1947 to 1999, nothing significant had changed after the turn of the millennium ... until a year ago. On June 26, 2021, *DER SPIEGEL* ran the cover story “Are we still alone? The Pentagon’s UFO files and the search for life in space,” in which the tone of the article had changed significantly. And on April 12 of this year, a very popular science program in Germany on the subject of UFOs was broadcast on a public television channel during prime time. Are these signs of a paradigm shift? Certainly not for a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense, i. e. a change of scientific theories or models. In terms of public discourse, the argument for a paradigm shift can be read in the article by Anton and Vugrin in this issue (Anton & Vugrin, 2022). However, I think it is unlikely that this jolt in public discourse can be applied to other areas of anomalistics. Each field and topic have its own contingencies; whether the “paradigm shift” in public UFO discourse will endure remains to be seen.

The heterogeneity of the research field of anomalistics becomes clear in the contributions to this issue of the *JAnom*. They concern quite different classes of the extraordinary or “miraculous” that are mentioned above. The greatest challenge for most readers is probably the recordings of unidentified objects with “impossible” flight characteristics. The alien hypothesis may seem extremely implausible to many for various reasons, but so are conventional explanations, if the recorded phenomena are taken seriously along with the reports. At the very other end of the scale of the miraculous is the cryptozoological hypothesis reported by Taake in his contribution to the “Bauernschreck” (Taake, 2022). The fact that an escaped lion is said to have caused cattle

4 <https://www.dctp.tv/filme/die-wissenschaft-ist-der-grossten-krise-seit-dem-buchdruck-prof-lorraine-daston> (from minute 2:12 on; translation by G.M.)

damage in the Alps contradicts our idea of Central European fauna, but not our understanding of the world. Here we would simply be dealing with a very rare and unusual event, which, above all, encourages experts to discuss its probability. So it is “only” a potential anomaly of the discipline, i. e. an OK anomaly. On the other hand, “after-death communication”, as it is treated in the paper of Elsaesser et al. (2022), represents a worldview challenge for many scientists. Besides accompanying psi phenomena, the reports of after-death communication suggest that individual consciousness contents continue to exist after biological death, i. e. they *prima facie* suggest the survival hypothesis. This is not necessarily the case with poltergeist phenomena. They can be interpreted psychodynamically, for instance with a “poltergeist” model, in which the phenomena analyzed in detail in the contribution by Huesmann and Schriever are understood as externalizations of unconscious personal or systemic tensions (Huesmann & Schriever, 2022). The categorical assignment of the anomalistic phenomena depends largely on one’s own worldview.

Reports are included at the data level for all of the anomalies that are the subject of the four articles. This is evident in the contribution by Taake. It is based entirely on the analysis of contemporary newspaper reports partly based on eyewitness accounts. The questionnaire study by Elsaesser et al. elicited reports of subjective extraordinary experiences and asked for details about them. In the case of poltergeist phenomena and UFOs, we are dealing with phenomena that can take on the quality of objectively documentable facts. But even these “objective” facts cannot be interpreted without contextualizing them through reports from the observers involved. In the area of anomalistics anchored in the lifeworld, nothing is independent of subjective evidence and interpretations, cultural embeddings, and media reporting,⁵ which must be taken into account with the concept of reflexive anomalistics (Mayer & Schetsche, 2016).

In principle, these connections already existed during the period covered by Daston and Park in their book. Similarly, peoples’ curiosity, wonder, and fascination with the miraculous and the extraordinary have not changed, including the controversies surrounding it.⁶

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Die Wißbegierde ist ein Laster, das nach und nach vom Christentum, von der Philosophie und sogar von einer bestimmten Wissenschaftskonzeption stigmatisiert worden ist. Wißbegierde, Nichtigkeit. Dennoch gefällt mir das Wort; es suggeriert mir etwas anderes: es evoziert die „Sorge“; es evoziert, daß man sich um das was existiert und was existieren könnte bemüht; ein geschärfter Sinn fürs Wirkliche, der aber niemals vor ihm zur

5 Ultimately, this applies to all science, but these dependencies come to the fore in anomalistics.

6 Last correction of the English version of the Editorial: July 1, 2022.