

## Editorial

### Good and Bad Gatekeeping in Anomalistics

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In April this year I took part in the workshop “Gatekeeping in Science”, organized by the two philosophers Katherine Dormandy and Federica Malfatti at the University of Innsbruck (<https://trau-project.org/#events>). I was surprised and pleased to have been invited to this event as a “frontier scientist.” Even if the workshop topic suggests such participation, one cannot assume that the philosophy of science has anomalistics “on its radar” as a serious field of research. The area of the “irrational,” in which paranormal or anomalistic phenomena are regularly located, is considered the subject of religious studies, ethnology or psychology (“How do paranormal beliefs arise?” “Through which perceptual illusions and malfunctions of cognitive signal processing are paranormal phenomena suggested?”). Only rarely is it taken seriously as an epistemological challenge for science and philosophy, as, for example, in the two-volume anthology *Der Wissenschaftler und das Irrationale* [The Scientist and the Irrational], edited by Hans Peter Duerr (Duerr, 1981b, 1981a). In Innsbruck, the organizers did the same and followed the wish to include this aspect in the discussion about drawing of boundaries and gatekeeping in science. Thus, I was able to enjoy a stimulating exchange in a very hospitable atmosphere.

For many participants, anomalistics was a closed book, and for some of them it will probably remain so, as they do not understand the relevance of this “discipline,” which is dwarfed in terms of human and economic resources, for science on a large scale. Others, however, have recognized that anomalistics touches on fundamental questions of an epistemic nature that should have significance far beyond the actual field of research. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889–1951) famous and provocative sentence “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein, 1922, p. 90), with which he concludes his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, results from the aim of that book, namely to “draw a limit (...) to the expression of thoughts” (Wittgenstein, 1922, p. 23), based on the philosophy of language. One could playfully refer to this aim and consider the extent to which the boundary drawn is socially constructed and thus also the area about which one cannot speak, about which one must remain silent. Understood in this way, anomalistics would also be work on the limits and boundaries of what can be said.

I went to Innsbruck curious, but not intellectually unbiased, burdened by my experiences with the gatekeeping that every scientist in the field of anomalistics knows: the disqualification and ridiculing of one's own work as pseudoscience, for example by the well-known physicist and philosopher Gerhard Vollmer: "Parapsychology is a pseudoscience" (Vollmer, 2017, p. 87). This devaluation can certainly result in the fact that, for example, the mere use of a provocative word such as "parapsychology" makes access to conferences or publication opportunities in mainstream scientific journals more difficult or even impossible. At this point, I would just like to cite as an example the letter of disinvitation from the Nobel Prize winner for physics, Brian Josephson, from a workshop on the "Foundation of Physics." Josephson received the following from the organizer of the workshop: „It has come to my attention that one of your principal research interests is the paranormal ... in my view, it would not be appropriate for someone with such research interests to attend a scientific conference" (<http://www.tcm.phy.cam.ac.uk/~bdj10/articles/uninvite.html>).

The term "pseudoscience" is usually used with little reflection and mostly refers to the choice of research field and not to the practice or objective of science, namely the systematic collection, organization and expansion of knowledge. Wanting to research UFOs, crop circles or phenomena such as clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis is considered nonsensical and irrational. Those who do so, according to such critics, are practicing "science as if," as Terence Hines writes in his book *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*, in which he deals with topics such as astrology and the Bermuda Triangle, reincarnation and firewalking, cryptozoology and telepathy, as well as psychoanalysis and the perceptive abilities of plants (Hines, 2003). And in the *Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience*, William Williams gives the following definition of "pseudoscience": "1. All pseudoscience is irrational; that is, it disregards or contradicts rational principles. 2. Pseudoscience does not proceed by trial and error but by revelation" (Williams, 2000, p. xix). However, what is regarded as contradictory to "rational principles" and therefore irrational – whether, for example, the claims that "the moon is made of green cheese" or "pigs can fly" is equated with the claim that "telepathy exists" in terms of plausibility – is strongly dependent on individual imagination and the world view held in each case. This becomes very clear, for example, in the case of the aforementioned Gerhard Vollmer, when he writes: "Clairvoyance, precognition, telepathy, telekinesis/psychokinesis, hauntings, sorcery, witchcraft, voodoo, esoterica, horoscopes, astrology, UFOs, extraterrestrial visitors: none of this exists" (Vollmer, 2017, p. 87; translated by G.M.).<sup>1</sup> The demarcation between science and pseudoscience cannot be objectified at this level.

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1 Quite apart from the thematic aspect of this statement, one is surprised by the logical and linguistic quality of such a sentence from the pen of a philosopher. It is similarly astonishing when Vollmer announces a "list of disciplines" and lists research objects or objects of knowledge such as "Atlantis," "esoteric water," "Velikovskiy" and "rebirth" (Vollmer, 2017, pp. 87–90).

Having in mind the experiences with the demarcation efforts of the scientific mainstream towards parapsychology and anomalistics, the term “gatekeeping” had an exclusively negative connotation for me, whereby I overlooked two obvious things: its own blind spot and the positive aspects of gatekeeping. In her talk, Katherine Dormandy mentioned three points that good gatekeeping must fulfill: (1) it must protect something of real value, here: the epistemic and ethical values of science; (2) its methods must be appropriate to the thing worth protecting, here: they must respect the ideals of science; and (3) it must succeed in (a) including the things that are worth it, here: practices and projects that can rightly be called scientific or proto-scientific, and (b) keeping out the things that are not worth it, here: “pseudoscience,” scientific fraud and bad science. It is therefore about maintaining the quality of science, but not excluding surprising new paradigms (see also Dormandy & Grimley, 2024).

And my blind spot? I realized that gatekeeping is also constantly practiced in parapsychology and anomalistics, because research in frontier areas, which is in a precarious situation with regard to the recognition of its scientific status, has to particularly emphasize its own seriousness and distance itself from the common clichés about Bigfoot and ghost hunters.

However, good gatekeeping in anomalistics seems to me to be just as difficult as in science in general. Especially in a field of research that suffers from a lack of funding and manpower and thrives on the idealism of committed individuals, scientific amateurs can also make important observations and provide data. In addition, they are often the first to be contacted via social media, especially when it comes to phenomena and experiences that are judged as irrational and, in the worst case, pathologized by “official” science. For this reason alone, it seems to me that an openness of academic frontier area researchers towards amateurs would be beneficial.

There have been repeated efforts to connect such different communities. During the PA/SPR conference in Greenwich in 2015, for example, a team led by the British parapsychologist Chris Roe reported on the establishment of a research laboratory for the scientific investigation of mediumism at the Arthur Findley College<sup>2</sup> (Mayer, 2015; Roe et al., 2015). And another example: James Houran, along with a team of colleagues, is trying to involve citizen scientists in academic research by using questionnaires and checklists to collect data for the analysis of haunting incidents (cf., e. g., Houran et al., 2023; see also Hill et al., 2019).

However, in addition to the research aspect, which often focuses on the “authenticity” of the reported phenomena and the conditions for their occurrence, therapeutic questions should also be considered. As most readers will be aware, psychodynamic aspects play an important

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2 “The World’s Foremost College for the Advancement of Spiritualism and Psychic Sciences” (<https://www.arthurfindlaycollege.org/>).

role in personal hauntings (Fach & Belz, 2015; Mayer & Bauer, 2015), which may be associated with massive psychological stress or illness. If there is a lack of awareness in such cases, great damage can be done. Good and trust-building contact between counseling centers for extraordinary experiences with professionally trained counselors and the ghosthunting community is therefore highly desirable.

In this issue of the *Journal of Anomalistics*, we have made such contact between academic and amateur research fruitful and invited ghosthunter Sonja Nowara to collaborate on an article. With her expertise, we can gain a valuable subjective insight into the German ghosthunting scene from an insider's perspective. It is an attempt at good gatekeeping in anomalistics.

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