Evaluating the Munich Dowsing Experiments

I write to commend the comprehensive and valuable work that J. T. Enright ("Testing Dowsing: The Failure of the Munich Experiments," January/February 1999) has accomplished in providing a skeptical re-evaluation of the results of extensive testing of dowsing capabilities. His detailed exposition effectively disposes of claims for success in the data of Betz and his colleagues as evaluated.

Having dispatched this particular empirical effort Enright is, however, doubtful whether his observations will have any fundamental impact on future claims for dowsing, and in that doubt I join him. As Enright so lucidly notes, the sequential dismissal of discrete experimental procedures tends largely to lead toward argument over *methodological* concerns which, almost unavoidably, will vary in their detail from procedure to procedure. Rather, what is needed is a more thorough examination of putative cause.

In the brief evaluation that I undertook (*SI*, "Dowsing the Rollrights" January/February 1998) I found numerous supposed causes ranging from magnetism, through "ley" energy, to "some form of electrical force." More have been identified by Vogt and Hyman (*Water Witching USA*, 1979), while Enright also refers to cryptic "earthrays" as the purported source of influence advocated in the study which he examined. Each of these "causes" is effectively "underspecified." That is, they provide insufficient level of articulation as to the causal sequence such that *any* experimental evaluation could either support or disconfirm the claims that are made.

In my own observation I suggested that it was the interaction between the dowser, the dowsing tool used, and the environment which resulted in the behavior observed. While this may be difficult to establish as an *exclusive* cause, the advantage is that this proposition can be fully articulated and shown at least to be a sufficient explanation. It calls upon no esoteric "forces" but simply the known principles of physics, physiology, and psychology to account for phenomena observed in the field.

When bias, expectation, and like contaminants are removed or largely mitigated (as Betz and his colleagues seemed to have achieved) results appear to differ little from chance—a result fully in agreement with this explanation of self as unrecognized cause. Until such experimental evaluations can be used to confront fully developed competing theories with disparate behavioral predictions, the continued piecemeal evaluation of dowsing capability will provide no satisfactory result for either proponent or skeptic.

Since a standard "theory" using known principles is already extant (see Hancock 1998; Vogt and Hyman 1979), the onus is on those who advocate "earthrays," "ley energy," "electrical force," and similar esoterica to provide a comprehensive alternate theory in order that extensive efforts (such as those undertaken by Betz and his co-workers) result in effective progress rather than polemical antagonism.

P.A. Hancock
Director, Human Factors
Research Laboratory
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minn.

Professor Enright's article certainly makes it appear that the claim that the massive Munich experiment proved the efficacy of dowsing is absurdly optimistic. However, I thought it would be worth running a control experiment. I took alternate pairs of digits of pi and used them to represent the pipe positions and the dowsers' estimates in decimeters. Using the first 20,000 digits of pi allowed each of 500 phantom dowsers to make ten trials. Computing the standard deviation of their miss distances led to the conclusion that number 500 (oddly enough) was the best dowser. His (or her) standard deviation was 179 cm, somewhat better than Enright's "Moderate Skill" category.

Measuring from Enright's Figure 2b it seems that the best "real" dowser did no better than a standard deviation of 393 cm. My control experiment suggests that, even in the total absence of dowsing ability, a test of 500 dowsers should have done much better than the Munich experiment. Has psi-missing cropped up yet again?

Tom Napier
North Wales, Pa.

I appreciated J. T. Enright's article about the Munich dowsing experiments, since I come in contact with far more believers in dowsing than believers in alien abductions or spontaneous human combustion. Indeed, a January 7 issue of one of our local (York, Pennsylvania) newspapers carried yet another story about a successful local dowser. It's remarkable how a newspaper can, on one page, run an editorial or article about the shortcomings of today's education systems, and on another page promote anti-education, lending credence to H.L. Mencken's observation that "a newspaper is a device for making the ignorant more ignorant and the crazy crazier."

When I first encountered believers in my work as a hydrogeologist, I thought they were just a few holdover, superstitious hillbillies. With time, however, I learned they were ubiquitous and under no threat of extinction. When they argue the efficacy of dowsing, they frequently propose scientific-sounding explanations and suggest tests to prove their belief (usually indicating naiveté regarding physical forces and testing protocols). Do newspaper accounts apply any critical thinking to these stories?

Interestingly, the newspaper article related how the dowser, contrary to the practice of geologists, first examines aerial photographs to find water-bearing fracture zones; evidently the reporter, ignorant of the subject he was reporting on, did not realize that this is standard practice for geologists seeking water in this kind of terrain!

Mark T. Duigon
Stewartstown, Pa.

The analysis of the water dowsing experiments by J. T. Enright seems to me to be the best scientific research I have yet seen on this controversial project. Too bad the believers working with the experiments couldn't face the negative results.

In our region of New Mexico, many ranchers and farmers are firm believers in the abilities of dowsers. I myself, as an archaeologist, am more interested in those who dowse for the location of hidden sites. Amateurs in particular believe in their powers. It seems almost impossible to me to set up an accurate test of their supposed abilities. I believe that such abilities, to the extent displayed in real situations and not in artificial experiments, reside not in "earth lines" or any other such things but in their previous experience with water or with sites.

An experienced and well-trained archaeologist can often look at the surface evidence at a completely covered archaeological site and find clues to what lies beneath. I have watched several "artifact dowsers" pull their forked stick down and claim that under this spot lie some Indian artifacts or even a buried pueblo. In many instances they prove their point. It is my belief that

any seasoned professional archaeologist could do the same thing without a dowsing rod. It is the open eye and the brain, not the forked stick, that determines failure or success in seeking archaeological objects hidden under the surface.

Walking over an Indian site that is completely subsurface I can usually determine what areas would be the most successful for excavation. A slight dip in the surface of an archaeological location might suggest a subsurface open fire pit or if larger, the interior of a walled room located below the surface. A change in vegetation along a narrow strip of some length could be the result of a hidden wall only a foot or two below the surface. A damp spot could suggest that beneath the surface there might exist a sluggish spring, perhaps once the Indians' source of water. If the surface covers the ruins of a shallow buried pueblo, the outline of the pueblo buildings, while little evidence is visible to the layman, can often be determined by an experienced archaeologist studying the surface shape.

I believe that a seasoned archaeologist could speculate the size, shape, and features of the subsurface ruin far better than a professed site dowser could. All these observable criteria on the surface, however, are usually not boldly obvious to the average dowser but must be observed by someone with considerable experience to study the surface and suggest what lies below it. However, some dowsers, through experience, may have developed a thought pattern regarding what may lie under the surface. If so, this individual using a dowsing rod might subconsciously respond to specific surface criteria, and without conscious intent, lower his dowsing rod and believe that his forked stick alone has made this discovery.

George A. Agogino
Portales, N.M.

The article "Testing Dowsing" by J. T. Enright merits, I believe, some criticism of the author's methodology and the conclusions that can be drawn from his analysis. His analysis does show that most likely the group of forty-three claimed dowsers have no ability, common to all claimants, to locate a small pipe carrying water. In no way does it disprove what Enright states in the first few lines of his article, that: ". . . certain skilled individuals can discover underground water. . . ."

An individual skill is just that, an individual skill. The true existence of an individual skill cannot be determined by lumping that individual's score with other scores, even though it is suspected that they also possess that skill and to precisely the same degree. But that was not known in advance; in fact, the opposite was determined in the elimination tests. Moreover, each individual's score was not the same from test to test.

The author admits that this lumping might be objected to but claims it is justified on the basis of the dowsers' claims to have the ability. That lumping then proves that most of the dowsers had no such ability, which, ipso facto, proves that there was no basis for lumping the data.

I feel certain that if the author were searching for, say, auditorially gifted people who could hear sounds beyond the normally quoted upper frequency of 20,000 cps, he would not take the combined results of tests of a group of individuals as evidence that none existed. Auditory sensitivity is an individual attribute and an individual's ability cannot be determined on the basis of tests of other individuals.

Donald F. Weitzel
Winnetka, Calif.

Fashionable Ideas a Danger

Please include more excellent articles like Susan Haack's "A Fallibilist Among the Cynics" (January/February 1999). I believe that these currently fashionable ideas in philosophy give a false intellectual endorsement to the pseudoscientific beliefs your magazine exposes. In that sense, I believe they are far more dangerous than the individual cases of pseudoscientific belief, since they can be used to give an intellectual veneer to *any* idea, regardless of its scientific or moral merit.

Robert D. Fowler
Vidalia, La.
rdfowler@iamerica.net

Fears of the Apocalypse

I certainly agree with Dr. Kurtz when he says that the most frightening prognostications are the scenarios of population and the environment ("Fears of the Apocalypse," January/February 1999). But in attempting to include predictions of population numbers and predictions of environmental devastation in his thesis he commits his own

"Escape from Reason." I think that he confuses two types of predictions, absolute and conditional. As an illustration, I will make two predictions of my own:

(1) Absolute. The number of humans on Earth will soon reach six billion.

(2) Conditional. If the present rate of population continues, the world population will double in forty years.

I will defend the second prediction first. This is easy because it is just mathematics. My condition is that the present rate of increase continues. Any quantity that increases at a constant rate with respect to time is an exponential function of time. The parameters are determined and I simply plug in the time representing forty years hence and obtain my result. Now let us suppose it is 2039 and the population has not doubled.

Will Dr. Kurtz say that my prediction that I made in 1999 was frightening and irresponsible? Should my prediction be included in a list of doomsday predictions made by religious cultists and movie producers? This can happen only if the mistake is made of neglecting the *condition* and misrepresenting my prediction as being *absolute*.

I sincerely hope that world population never doubles. I do not think that our planet can sustain such numbers without enormous human suffering. As for the first prediction, anyone can check for himself or herself. I suggest **www.zpg.org**, **www.npg.org** or **www.popcouncil.org**, for example, as places where the numbers can be monitored as you hold my feet to the fire on this one.

In the 1960s environmental scientists made the grave prediction that American raptors would be wiped out by the effects of DDT. There is an implied condition there. That is *if we do not ban the production and use of DDT.*

We *did* ban DDT and since that time,

the bald eagle and peregrine falcon have made a tremendous comeback. Those scientists suffered much criticism in the 1960s from selfish interests. Should we criticize them again today and say that their predictions were frightening and wrong because there are plenty of healthy raptors? I suggest that you try to make a parallel with the Lake Erie story, Dr. Kurtz, and then we will talk about global warming and the ozone layer.

Sam W. Young
Opelika, Ala.

End Time Prophecies

In the article "The Bible and the Prophets of Doom" (January/February 1999), I was very surprised to find that you did not quote the words of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of *Matthew, chapter 24, which include the following:* "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father . . . the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." This alone causes me to doubt any follower of Christ who claims to know the specific date for the end of time.

Larry Harrington
Sherwood, Ore.

Leinster's 'Logic' Internet

While H. G. Wells was scoring high points in his anticipation of the Internet in his 1938 book *World Brain* ("Notes of a Fringe Watcher," January/February 1999), an even more remarkable forecast was made by Will F. Jenkins (Murray Leinster) in his 1946 short story, "A Logic Named Joe." What Jenkins called "logics" were what we today would call a PC: small, desk-top computer terminals resembling "a vision receiver . . . only it's got *keys instead of dials and you punch the keys* for what you wanna get." Every home has one. Logics are in turn hooked into an enormous mainframe computer called "the tank." Do you want to listen to a particular TV station? Just punch in the station's call letters and the broadcast appears on your screen. Want to talk with a friend? Just type in "'Sally Hancock's Phone' an' the screen blinks an' splutters an' you're hooked up with the logic in her house." Likewise, the logic can be used to obtain weather forecasts, racing results, historical information, stock market reports . . . literally anything. Your logic will do math for you, keep your books, act as consultin' chemist, physicist, astronomer, an' tealeaf reader, with an 'Advice to Lovelorn' thrown in." Businesses have depended on logics for their computing for years and the tank distributes 94 percent of all telecasts. It handles airline schedules, employment opportunities, and news. Local "tanks" are hooked up with all of the other tanks around the country in a single enormous network. The story's plot centers around some of the dangers that evolve from the indiscriminate availability of information—yet, as the narrator points out, the network cannot be shut down: "Logics changed civilization. Logics *are* civilization! If we shut off the logics, we go back to the kind of civilization we have forgotten how to run!"

Given that Jenkins had only another decade's worth of technological advancement to draw upon than Wells did (the first electronic digital computer had been constructed only three years earlier and it was not exactly a desktop model), his description of what is essentially the Internet—and the ubiquity of the PC—is astonishingly detailed and accurate.

Ron Miller
King George, Va.

Yourdon and Y2K

Robert Sheaffer's column "Apocalypse Soon" (January/February 1999) discusses Ed Yourdon at some length. But it does not mention one aspect of his past that might be relevant to the discussion. Ed Yourdon published *Decline and Fall of the American Programmer* in 1992, a book that predicted the end of most American programming jobs in the very near future. In 1996 he wrote *Rise and Resurrection of the American Programmer,* an almost point-by-point refutation of *Decline and Fall.* Given this history, I will not be surprised to see *How We Solved the Year 2000 Crisis* from Mr. Yourdon in 2001.

Charles Shapiro
Avondale Estates, Ga.

How to Test Alternative Drugs?

The conclusion of Marcia Angell and Jerome P. Kassirer in "Alternative Medicine: The Risks of Untested and Unregulated Remedies" (January/February 1999) that "alternative treatments should be subjected to scientific testing" is correct. But everyone already agrees with it. The real problem is: How can we get that testing done?

The patent system has given us many good, new medicines and medical devices. The economic rewards to our pharmaceutical companies are great enough to pay for the discovery and extensive scientific testing of new medicines to prove their efficacy and safety. And most doctors and all HMOs prescribe only these patented drugs, because of the lawyers watching them and waiting.

However, relying solely on the patent system for money has eliminated the testing of three major sources of medicines. They are medicines that have been in general use (folk medicines), medicines that were tested and patented in other countries but not in the U.S., and medicines whose U.S. patents have expired. Folk medicines, foreign medicines, and expired medicines cannot be rigorously tested by the private sector, because no patents can be obtained to protect the income needed to pay for this testing.

New federal laws are needed to: (1) Provide government funding of university testing on the scale of pharmaceutical testing to evaluate unpatentable drugs in a double-blind way and to pass them by the FDA; (2) Provide monetary awards and recognition for laboratories and individuals that produce outstanding results; (3) Provide government funding of testing and tracking for and publication of adverse reactions for these drugs; (4) Require that manufacturers print these warnings with their products; and (5) Require that the FDA test to make sure that the bottles contain what they are labeled to contain.

Elliott Frauenglass
Newington, Conn.

I am getting tired of reading the misinformation and many unfounded attacks on so-called alternative medicine.

Yes, some of it is pure bunk and some is not. It takes an honest skeptic to tell one from the other. Your authors blacken everything even remotely under the shield of "alternative medicine" as bunk unless it is within the orthodox medical establishment. Since when has the skeptical community abdicated reason and scientific thought for diatribes?

Your January/February 1999 issue carries an article by Drs. Angell and Kassirer—the same authors who wrote an article for the September 17, 1998, *New England Journal of Medicine.*

I happen to personally know about the drug PC-SPES became I am on it and the information given by your authors is mis-

leading and false. Here are your authors' words from the article:

"PC-SPES has substantial estrogenic activity." True. What the authors did not mention is that it also has properties that lower testosterone levels and thus slow the rate of cancer growth in the prostate. According to Dr. Chen, developer of PC-SPES, it has cancer-controlling properties that go far beyond its estrogenic activity.

"This substance is promoted as bolstering the immune system in patients with prostate cancer." Yeah? Where is it promoted as such? I have not seen any such statement. The bottle itself says only that it is "Breakthrough Herbal Formula" and it is a "Dietary Supplement." The instructions (dosage) are on the bottle along with the ingredients "Chrysanthemum, Isatis, Licorice, Lucid ganoderma, Pseudo-ginseng, Rubescens, Saw Palmetto, Scute" and the name of the manufacturer. My doctors, Dr Julian Whitaker, M.D.—yes, he really is a medical doctor, and Dr. Martin Milner N.D.—shudder—an "infamous" naturopathic doctor, have never once told me it was to "boost my immune system." Although it probably does that job as well.

"Many men taking PC-SPES have thus received varying amounts of hormonal treatment without knowing it." They seem to think "we" are idiots, and I resent that. I don't know about "many men" and I don't think your authors know either. Have they made a survey of "many men" or are they just making a blanket statement—a guess? A guess is my supposition. In my specific case, I do know about the estrogenic activity and about hormonal blockade as well. Eulexin and flutamide are the drugs usually given for hormonal blockade. PC-SPES is an herbal alternative. With standard hormonal treatment many patients become resistant and unresponsive and PSA levels begin to rise again. PC-SPES in its ten years of testing shows that it can replace traditional hormonal blockade without that detriment. Do your authors know what they are talking about? I doubt it when it comes to "many men."

"The only legal requirement in the sale of such products is that they not be promoted as preventing or treating disease." (Well, since that's the legal requirement then it would be illegal for them to do that now wouldn't it.) "To comply with that stipulation, their labeling has risen to an art form of doublespeak . . . the medical uses for which they are sold are merely insinuations." What choice do they have? You complain because they don't flat come out and state what the substance is for? If they do, then you arrest them and confiscate the product. That is gross deception and entrapment. . . .

Yes, as I've said, a lot of it is bunk and should be discredited, but you throw out the baby with the bath water.

Ralph S. Blois
Woodburn, Ore.

"Alternative Medicine: The Risks of Untested and Unregulated Remedies" can hardly be said to have been written by unbiased individuals. Medical doctors have been trained from medical school to believe that if a medicinal candidate is not a patented chemical, and tested for decades, it cannot be effective. Further evidence of Angell and Kassirer's bias is shown when they infer that if "herbal medicine" is worthy of being used successfully, then why is it not tested by the FDA? Maybe they are not aware, but it can cost one to three hundred million dollars and take many years for the FDA to approve a new drug. Because natural food supplements cannot be patented, companies that produce them cannot afford to undergo FDA approval.

One of the Angell and Kassirer's statements in the article, "What sets alternative medicine apart, in our view, is that it has not been tested and its advocates largely deny the need for such testing." Just where is their evidence for this? It may be true of a few obvious quacks, but the mainstream supplement advocates seem to me to welcome testing if it could be done at reasonable costs.

Another statement Angell and Kassirer make sounds as if it came straight from a pharmaceutical lobbyist: "Alternative treatments should be subjected to scientific testing no less rigorous than that required from conventional treatments." It should be obvious to them that if this were required at the present average cost, there would be no testing, and alternative treatments would be banned by the FDA. This is what drug companies have been desperately seeking all along. However, if this is accomplished, the United States may lose any chance of discovering natural, inexpensive, effective medical treatments. . . .

William H. Holliday
Richmond, Va.

I generally enjoy and largely agree with the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER. I believe that overall you are performing a tremendous service for mankind. However, although I have no axe to grind one way or another on the issue, I must express my profound disappointment in your article on alternative medicine. While the authors' overall conclusions may well be correct, there is no way of determining that by the article, as it relies largely on the same brainwashing techniques that the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER and the article itself denounce.

The authors, being the editor and executive editor of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, clearly have a very strong self-interest in supporting the mainstream medical establishment and in discouraging alternatives. That in itself should solicit a healthy dose of skepticism.

The authors state: "No longer do we have to rely on trial and error and anecdotes." They then proceed to present a number of anecdotes and little else to point out the risks of alternative medicine. But of course they have now become "examples" rather than anecdotes. "These are without doubt simply examples of what will be a rapidly growing problem." A statement that we "without doubt" should simply accept on faith. . . .

Lindell Cline
Buena Vista, Calif.

I recently had an experience that may shed some light on the continuing controversy regarding alternative medicine.

I am seventy-two years old and have been taking medication to control my cholesterol level for the last seven years. In February 1998, I found that I was dizzy all the time and had trouble walking. Naturally I sought medical help with this problem. To make a long story short, I ultimately saw four doctors and underwent extensive testing and two heart operations but the problem still persisted. In fact, I believe that two of these doctors did not believe me when I described my symptoms.

In September 1998, I received feedback from people who had had similar experiences. I stopped taking the medicine (Mevacor) and noticed an immediate improvement and at present am 98 percent back to normal. A review of reference books describing prescription drug reactions in the local library revealed that my symptoms were, indeed, a side effect of the drug! Frankly, I am appalled at the cavalier treatment that I received. A complaint to the local medical society has gone unanswered as has a similar complaint to the local medical school. (I advised the doctors involved by copies of these letters.) Now my point is that this type of cavalier treatment is what probably drives many people to alternative

medicine. I should note that I have no intention of pursuing alternative medical procedures.

I hope that the medical community is listening!

Robert L. Tripician
Virginia Beach, Va.

More Letters on the Mead Freeman Controversy

When I first had problems with a Samoan student (in New Zealand), a colleague with some years of experience teaching in Samoa offered advice:

> Never ask a direct question; a Samoan teenager who is shy and anxious will blurt out an answer that may not be true. But *then honour demands that the answer be* defended as truth at all cost. Never allow them to answer "yes" or "no" as the chances of a correct answer are little better than 50 percent. Never even ask a student's name, instead try, "I may not say your name properly. Please save my embarrassment by saying it properly for me." Over many years I found this advice invaluable.

The SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, November/December 1998 contains articles by Shankman and Côté on the Mead/Freeman controversy. Côté points out that Freeman has gone directly to the media and public opinion. In physics this would be a clear token of pseudoscience, but do these articles indicate their discipline should be equated with the physical sciences? Both evade the main question that occurs to a nonanthropologist: Did Mead provide an accurate picture of Samoan society? Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa* takes each piece of Mead's research and shows that *nearly all give a picture of Samoan life* almost exactly the opposite of the truth. Côté states, "Serious scholars had been aware for years of the limitations of Mead's book," and "[*Coming of Age in Samoa*] is not a model for professional scholarship today." But how could Mead have got nearly everything about Samoa so wrong?

The charges by Côté of "long standing anti-Americanism among some Australians" or Freeman seen as a "brave Aussie standing up to bullying Yanks" are simply bizarre. It is pertinent, however, to consider the relative standing of Mead and Freeman in *Samoan society. They felt betrayed by* Mead; Freeman is held in the highest regard.

Côté claims that Freeman's book "has been dismissed in numerous scholarly examinations." He does not tell us that this book was critically examined before publication by Samoan scholars. Samoans were convinced that Freeman and not Mead gave an accurate picture of their society. Yet Côté has the gall to accuse Freeman of selective use of evidence.

Interested skeptics should watch West Samoa play in the Rugby World Cup this Northern summer (TV or video). No knowledge of the game will be required to decide whether Mead was correct in claiming that Samoa was a passionless society, lacking in competitive spirit.

Jim Ring
Nelson, New Zealand

James Côte strives to convince the reader that "Derek Freeman's polemical arguments about Margaret Mead's Samoan research fail to stand up to tests of evidence. . ." (p. 29). The article focuses on a single, narrow question: Was Mead the victim of a "fateful hoax"? Côté relies heavily on Martin Orans's (1996) book to make his case. Orans indeed concludes that Freeman is mistaken on that point. But Côté's narrow focus seriously misrepresents Orans's message. *His title, Not Even Wrong,* gives Orans's judgment of Mead's Samoan research: Because Mead failed to follow the standard scientific rules of evidence,

> Her work may properly be damned with the harshest scientific criticism of all, that it is "not even wrong." . . . In short, if Mead is taken as having done science, she did a bad job of it, and the procedures she followed would have produced unreliable results whatever her hunches. (p. 155)

Orans says "certain of Freeman's criticism of Mead are wellfounded [sic]; certainly *there has been a long-standing bias against* including biological factors in our understanding of human behavior, and a number of Mead's statements regarding life in Samoa are very misleading" (p. 11). Besides the hoaxing issue, Orans does fault Freeman for treating Mead as capable of refutation on the basis of facts at all. (If Orans were right in this it would be fruitless to ask if *The Grapes of Wrath* is a fair portrayal of the dust bowl.) Considered as a whole, Orans's book is far from a ringing endorsement of Mead.

Donald McBurney
Department of Psychology
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pa.

(See also the "Follow-Up" column exchanges in this issue on page 60.—ED.)

Karma Is Not Fate

I wish to comment on the book review article "A Cogent Consideration of the Case for Karma (and Reincarnation)" written by Barry L. Beyerstein.

Beyerstein does not seem to have an understanding of the Buddhist concept of Karma. Buddhist Karma is not fate nor is it the notion "in life people get what they deserve and deserve what they get." If we get sick with lung cancer, this is not Karmic retribution for something we did in a past life but rather falls under the category that Buddhists refer to as *objective conditions. Our illness was likely caused because we* smoked too much or perhaps we were in some way genetically predisposed toward cancer. Karma means *our action.* Basically it means that our mental and spiritual well-being are determined by our own actions (Karma), not by fate, not by chance, not by miracle, and not by a divine being. Karma is how we respond to life's "ups and downs." In other worlds, it would be how we mentally responded to getting lung cancer and the spiritual insight we gained through experience. . . .

Harry McNicholas
Portland, Ore.

Miracles and Nature's Laws

I am puzzled by the letter from Daniel Barnett, David Bloomberg, Tim Holmes et al. in the January/February 1999 issue. They *object to Wayne Anderson's calling his sam*pling of biblical miracles "far-fetched" etc. and subsequently cite Christians who believe, through "faith" alone, that Jesus walked on water. Now if we adopt the orthodox proposition that Jesus was not only divine, but fully

human, we cannot allow that he was exempt from gravitational forces. Therefore, the belief that he walked on water constitutes a belief that the laws of physics can be suspended. It is of no consequence whether this belief is based upon faith, or upon the flimsy evidence of perhaps four documents, not even written by eyewitnesses. It is hard to imagine a more fundamental assault upon the basic assumptions of science.

Not all the miracles are as far-fetched as that. It is perfectly plausible that when Jesus said "she is not dead, but sleeping," he was literally describing catalepsy. It is plausible that certain others of the healing miracles were in fact cures of a psychosomatic sort. According to G. B. Shaw, Jesus was troubled by the dilemma that healing the sick would distract attention from his more important work, his message of how to conduct your life.

Then there is the famous miracle at the wedding in Cana. If ever anybody wants to show that Jesus was fun to have around, that's the one to quote. Once you have rejected the idea that the Almighty Creator of the laws of nature is liable to suspend them merely so his son can show off, you are left with something that strongly resembles what the liveliest and brightest students at places like MIT call a "hack." It is my understanding that on one occasion there, a police car miraculously appeared overnight on the dome of one of the buildings, and that on another, an immense black balloon bearing the letters MIT appeared in the middle of a football field occupied by the Harvard-Yale game. Neither of these miracles involved anything but stealth and confident engineering.

Experimental evidence shows that there are persons devoted to the scientific analysis of nature who believe in the Christian God. But like Wayne Anderson, I assert that belief in the sort of miracles that constitute suspension of the ordinary laws of nature is destructive of the ability to approach ordinary life rationally. Not only that, but it is destructive of belief in a rational God, which to my mind seems a kind of blasphemy.

Albert Rogers
Arlington, Va.

Hawking Didn't Say It

In case anyone takes umbrage with the really stupid ending of my letter to the editor in the January/February 1999 (regarding the Anderson article), it was a two-part misprint. I had intended to write:

"But I am still left with the uncomfortable slogan: *Steven Hawking said it, I believe it, and that settles it.* Except I never was much good in the faith department."

This was meant to be a humorous takeoff on the ubiquitous bumper sticker: *The Bible said it, I believe it, and that settles it.* It came out in print as:

"But I am still left with the uncomfortable slogan: Steven Hawking said, 'I believe it and that settles it.'"

Which really sounded dumb. After I got done cussing out the copy editors, I went back to the original and found that I had missed a small but important word, the "it" that comes after the word "said." Aargghh!!

There is no need to print this letter, but if anyone wants to know who is Bev Kaufman and how dare she slander Steven Hawking, that's what happened.

Bev Kaufman
Sunrise, Fla.

Attack of the Humorless!

Mr. Hone's recent letter, "ABC's Automated Autos!" (January/February), criticizing the recent satire "When Cars Attack," demonstrates something I have suspected for a long time—namely, some readers of *SI* have no sense of humor. According to Mr. Hone, the program may have led some viewers into the mistaken belief that automobiles were capable of autonomous mayhem.

Previously, the film *Men in Black* was denounced on the same basis—that innocent minds were deluded into believing that UFOs were somehow real and that Manhattan was an intergalactic refuge for alien lifeforms.

Perhaps all of this amorphous literary rubbish known as "fiction" should be banned, so as to protect the fragile minds of the masses. Perhaps films should be emblazoned with CSICOP warning: *This media does not comply with the skeptical ideology.*

Skeptics are far better off limiting their critiques to programs that pretend to factualism—such as "Alien Autopsy" and the nightly news. Questioning whether ABC News will cover its parent company, Disney, in an objective manner, or whether the cable news channels have any stake in stirring up an impeachment frenzy is more important than trying to eliminate satire.

Jeremy Erwin
Herndon, Va.

Mysteries of *Reader's Digest*

I thought the Roswell flurry was more or less vitiated by now. However, I just received a video from *Reader's Digest* entitled "Mysteries of Deep Space" along with a booklet stating the following:

(Page 25): "Why did the Army approach the town mortician asking about embalming methods and inquiring as to the availability of children's coffins. . . ? Why was an Army nurse, who witnessed the autopsy [of the aliens] transferred to England, only to die shortly thereafter? Why are four years of government documentation from the Roswell Army base missing—the years 1946–1950?"

Do these questions have any foundational validity? I doubt it, but I cannot substantiate my skepticism.

Generally, I carry the impression that *Reader's Digest* is reliable as far as it goes. But, I've concluded long ago that it has a strong bias for the traditional at the expense of really reaching for the truth.

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The letters column is a forum for views on matters raised in previous issues. Letters should be no more than 225 words. Due to the volume of letters not all can be published. Address letters to Letters to the Editor, SKEPTICAL INQUIRER. Send by mail (preferred) to 944 Deer Dr. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87122; by fax to 505-828-2080; or by e-mail to letters@csicop.org (include name and address).