



Twenty-Five Years of Skeptical Inquiry

In this issue we continue the 25th anniversary celebration of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. Founding chairman Paul Kurtz leads off our anniversary section with his personal perspectives. He reflects on the founding of CSICOP, four strategic issues CSICOP faced from the beginning, selected highlights of his personal involvement in the skeptical movement, some surprises of recent years, and the development of the skeptics movement in the last quarter century. *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* Editor Kendrick Frazier then continues with Part 2 of his thoughts on science and skepticism in the twenty-first century. These essays are excerpted from the forthcoming book *Skeptical Odysseys* (Prometheus 2001, editor Paul Kurtz), published in honor of CSICOP's twenty-fifth anniversary.

A Quarter Century of Skeptical Inquiry

My Personal Involvement

Paul Kurtz

The Creation of CSICOP

It is well known that I am the culprit responsible for the founding of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Why did I do so? Because I was dismayed in 1976 by the rising tide of belief in the paranormal and the lack of adequate scientific examinations of these claims. At that time a wide range of claims were everywhere present. Books such as Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?*, Immanuel Velikovsky's *Worlds in Collision*, and Charles Berlitz's *The Bermuda Triangle* were widely popular; and self-proclaimed gurus and soothsayers were stalking the media—from Uri Geller to Jeane Dixon. I was distressed that my students confused astrology with astronomy, accepted pyramid power, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, Kirlian photography, and psychic surgery without the benefit of a scientific critique. Most of my scientific colleagues were equally perplexed by what was happening, but they were focused on

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Paul Kurtz

their own narrow specialties—interdisciplinary efforts were frowned upon—and they did not know what the facts of the case were. Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* was available, but aside from that there were all too few skeptical studies in the literature for open-minded inquirers, let alone the general public.

It is within this cultural milieu as background that I decided to convene a special conference to discuss "The New Irrationalisms: Antiscience and Pseudoscience." This was held on the newly built Amherst Campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo (where I was a professor) on April 30–May 2, 1976. I drafted a call inviting a number of leading scholars to the inaugural session of the proposed new organization. This was endorsed by many philosophers, including W. V. Quine, Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, Brand Blanshard, and Antony Flew. And I invited many of the well-known skeptical critics to this opening session—Martin Gardner, Ray Hyman, Philip J. Klass, Marcello Truzzi, James Randi, L. Sprague de Camp, and Milbourne Christopher. The new organization, which I co-chaired with Truzzi, was to be called the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the

Paranormal (CSICOP). Our long-range goal was public education of the aims of science, particularly an appreciation for scientific methods of inquiry and critical thinking.

There had been other scientific efforts historically to investigate paranormal claims, such as the Society for Psychical Research founded in Great Britain in 1882 and in the United States in 1885 (by William James). And there had been many UFO groups which came into being in the post-World War II period. But most of these groups mainly attracted believers who were predisposed to accept the phenomena; the skeptics in their midst were few and far between. Thus CSICOP was the first body made up predominantly of skeptics, who were willing to investigate the alleged paranormal phenomena. We had been attacked by believers for being “closed-minded” and by other skeptics who claimed that we were dignifying phenomena that did not deserve special attention. But we thought that we had an important task to fulfill.

The Agenda

There were four strategic issues that CSICOP had to address at its founding.

First, what would be our approach to such phenomena? Would we simply be debunkers out to show by ridicule the folly of the claims that were made, or would we be serious investigators concerned with research into claims, dispassionate, open-minded inquirers? The answer was clear: Our chief focus would be on inquiry, not doubt. Where we had investigated a claim and found it wanting, we would express our doubt and perhaps even debunk it, but this would be only after careful investigation.

Second, we asked, what would be our relationship to paranormal believers? We observed that there were by now hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of pro-paranormal magazines and publications in the world, and that we were virtually the lone dissenting voice in the wilderness, as it were. We would be glad to engage believers in debate, but it would be our agenda, not theirs. Accordingly, we decided that we wished by and large to pursue our own research strategy, namely to encourage scientific and skeptical inquiry. Truzzi, cochairman and editor of *The Zetetic* (founded by him but which we took over), insisted that we present both believers and nonbelievers in dialogue in the pages of the magazine, and this he proceeded to do. Although members of the CSICOP Executive Council found this interesting and perhaps useful, they demurred because they felt that

there was already tremendous exposure of the pro-paranormalists’ viewpoint, and that we really wished to focus on the neglected skeptical case. Truzzi resigned from the editorship of the magazine, and indeed from the Executive Council, and the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* came into being, edited by veteran science writer Kendrick Frazier, who had covered the first meeting of CSICOP for *Science News*.

Third, one of the most difficult problems that we faced was, What was the relationship of the paranormal to religion?

Would CSICOP deal with religious questions? Our position has been from the start that we would not investigate religious claims unless there were empirical or experimental means for evaluating them. We were not concerned with religious faith, theology, or morality, but only with scientific evidence adduced for the religious claims.

Fourth, a most interesting and unexpected development occurred: immediately after forming CSICOP, many concerned scientists and skeptics said that they wanted to establish similar local groups in their areas in the United States. We helped them to do so by providing our subscription lists and sending speakers. Similarly, researchers in other countries said that they wished to do the same. We assisted this effort in any way we could. I personally visited virtually all of the nascent national organizations or sent other members of CSICOP

(especially James Randi, Mark Plummer, and Barry Karr). This included groups in Canada, England, France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, Mexico, and Russia. Thus skeptical organizations began forming throughout the world. What this meant was that CSICOP had become an international organization. Since science was international in scope, the critical examination of paranormal claims was also a matter for the international scientific community. This became all the more evident as the years went by, as the media became further globalized and paranormal programs produced, for example, in Hollywood, were exported virtually everywhere. Today there are approximately one hundred skeptics organizations in thirty-eight countries and a great number of magazines and newsletters published worldwide, and they continue to grow.

Needless to say the mainstay of the skeptics movement has been the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. Its development and influence grew under the brilliant editorship of Kendrick Frazier.

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Some Highlights of the First Quarter Century

After launching CSICOP, we immediately became embroiled in controversy; claims and counterclaims were bandied about. I can only touch on some highlights of my personal involvement in the skeptical movement. It is noteworthy that whatever we did as skeptics was intensely followed. Although we received a warm reception by mainline science magazines, we were bitterly attacked by believers. They accused us of being "the gatekeepers of science." They said that we blocked any consideration of new ideas and that we were suppressing new Galileos waiting in the wings to be discovered. We of course denied this and were willing to keep an open mind about any testable claim.

Astrology

This was particularly the case regarding the claims of astrology, including the investigations of Michel and François Gauquelin, who tried to support a new form of astrobiology. I will not describe this twenty-year effort except to say that their findings could not be replicated by skeptical inquirers. I think that one of the chief contributions of CSICOP over the past twenty-five years is that more scientific effort has been devoted to testing astrology than ever in the history of the subject, and many of these papers were published in the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. All of the results were negative.

We did at the same time conduct a public campaign in an effort to get newspapers to carry disclaimers to the effect that the daily astrological columns, which were based on sun signs, had no factual scientific support, but should be read for entertainment value only. We have managed to convince some sixty newspapers to carry such disclaimers.

Parapsychology

Many of CSICOP's efforts were devoted to examining the claims of parapsychologists. We had an excellent parapsychological subcommittee, headed by Professor Ray Hyman of the University of Oregon, and including James Alcock, Barry Beyerstein, and others. This committee worked with other psychologists in the United Kingdom, especially Susan Blackmore, Christopher French, Richard Wiseman, and David Marks.

I should say that although most skeptics believed that there was considerable trickery afoot or self-deception in "psychical research," I was not certain whether psi phenomena existed. My skeptical colleagues insisted that such phenomena were unlikely, but I decided to investigate for myself, to satisfy my own curiosity. I did this by teaching a course, "Philosophy, Parapsychology, and the Paranormal," at the university. Most of the students who registered for the course were believers—I gave them a poll on the first day to determine their level of credulity. My plan was to work closely with students on various experiments in order to test psychic and other claims. I repeated the course four times over eight years, and had over 250 students enroll. They con-

ducted nearly 100 independent tests.

The thing that absolutely stunned me was the fact that we never had positive results in *any* of the many tests conducted. I have never published these findings, for I did them basically to satisfy my desire (and that of my students) to ascertain whether anything paranormal could be uncovered. Was the so-called goat effect (doubters dampening psychic ability) suppressing the evidence? I doubt it. What I do know is that with rigorous protocols we invariably had negative results. Indeed, although 90 percent of the students began the course as believers, by the end 90 percent became extremely skeptical because of the failure to demonstrate the paranormal in their own experiments.

In my view, if we are to accept any psi factor—and we should always be open to further inquiry—we need simply to insist upon three things: first, that any results be replicated in laboratories in which neutral and/or skeptical inquirers are involved; second, that tight protocols be used so that there can be no sensory leakage; and third, that careful and rigorous grading standards be adhered to, for what constitutes a hit is often questionable.

One of my most memorable experiences in the earlier years was my debate with J. B. Rhine on April 19, 1978, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. One amusing incident that occurred was that we were both wearing the same color and style of suit. I asked Mr. Rhine whether this was of paranormal significance or due to chance. I thought that he was a kindly gentleman but rather naïve.

Uri Geller

From the late 1980s until the mid-1990s CSICOP was confronted with legal suits brought by Uri Geller, who claimed that he had been libeled by James Randi and CSICOP. These legal battles took almost a decade to resolve. Geller was unable to prove his case, and CSICOP was awarded court costs. Geller also sued Prometheus Books for publishing books by James Randi (*The Truth about Uri Geller*) and Victor Stenger (*Physics and Psychics*), who had quoted Randi, and me for a passage I had published in *The Transcendental Temptation*, also drawing upon Randi's account. We agreed to modify these passages. At the present moment, suits still continue in Great Britain, and threats are constant from Geller, who has sued many others.

In any case, the courts refused to find in favor of Uri Geller, who claimed that he has special psychic powers, which he refused to have tested in a court of law. The amount of time and effort spent in defending ourselves against Uri Geller was exhausting. We were gratified that our readers rallied to the cause. They were deeply concerned about these harassing suits against a scientific body. Any time a new suit was leveled against us, contributions poured in, enabling us to fight back.

UFOlogy

UFOlogy has proven to be especially fascinating. Philip J. Klass, a veteran UFO investigator, became chairman of a new UFO subcommittee which was made up of about nineteen skeptical

investigators, including Robert Sheaffer, Gary Posner, and James Oberg. We each were numbered with a 00 before our name; by chance I happened to have the number 007, reminiscent of James Bond. There were so many claims proliferating in the public domain, and in the media, that the most this committee could do was selectively attempt to explain those which were most prominent. Philip J. Klass did a yeoman's job especially in seeking out alternative causal explanations. I myself was particularly intrigued by the ETI hypothesis because I thought it was entirely possible that intelligent life existed elsewhere in the universe (even though it was sometimes difficult to find it on Earth!). But whether we were being visited or had been visited by extraterrestrial beings manning advanced-state technological spacecraft was the issue. We needed to find some hard physical evidence to corroborate these claims. The one thing that perplexed me was that eyewitnesses were so often deceived. Given the cultural milieu and the prominence of such reports almost daily at that time, many people looking at the sky thought that they had seen UFOs. Obviously they had seen *something* in the sky, but whether it was a planet, entering rockets from Soviet or U.S. space probes, meteors, weather balloons, advertising planes, or something else was unclear. I had met many people who claimed to have seen UFOs and were intrigued by what I suspected to be the will to believe, or the transcendental temptation at work.

One area that really shocked us was the growth of reports of UFO abductions. Although Barney and Betty Hill in the famous New Hampshire case (in 1961) claimed that they had been abducted aboard a UFO, most UFOlogical investigators were dubious of this and other similar reports. Accordingly, it came as a surprise to us when about ten years ago reports of abductions not only began to proliferate, but were taken seriously. We were puzzled by the claims. I debated many of the proponents on television or radio—Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, and John Mack. Carl Sagan wrote me to say that given the intense public interest, we really ought to look into this phenomenon carefully to see if anything is there. With this in mind we invited John Mack to our national convention in Seattle, Washington, in 1994, at a special session on UFO abductions. Mack said that he was convinced that these abductions were real, that he had a number of otherwise trustworthy people who reported such experiences under hypnosis, and he had to accept their claims as true. At an open meeting Phil Klass and John Mack tangled, but we allowed Mack every opportunity to present his point of view. What was at issue was whether or not psychiatrists should accept at face value the subjective reports of their patients. Would John Mack accept the hallucinations of schizophrenics who believe deeply in the worlds of fantasy that they concoct? If not, then why accept the uncorroborated reports of UFO abductees?

An interesting sidelight: I headed a delegation of the CSICOP Executive Council to China in 1988. We spoke to several large audiences in Shanghai and Beijing. I invariably raised

the open questions: "Has anyone in the audience ever been abducted aboard a UFO?" or "Does anyone know of someone who has been abducted?" The response was always in the negative. What were we to conclude from this: that the ETs are prejudiced against Chinese and only kidnap Westerners, or that the Western media hype at that time had not penetrated the Chinese mainland?

I must say that in my own empirical inquiry I have yet to find a UFO case that withstood critical scrutiny. The "sightings" in my view are not evidence for ET visitations; rather they were most likely in the "eyes of the beholders" and they tell us something about ourselves.

Believing the Unbelievable

Perhaps the most surprising thing that has occurred over the past few years is that as increasing waves of media sensationalism have inundated the public, what was formerly considered to be unbelievable is suddenly accepted as true by much of the public. Added to this is the "unsinkable rubber duck" phenomenon; namely, although skeptical investigators may thoroughly refute a claim in one generation, it may come back to haunt us in the next—as a hydra-headed monster—with new intensity and attraction. I wish to briefly illustrate this by reference to other recent weird claims.

Communicating with the Dead

In the late 1990s a spate of best-selling books by a new generation of spirit mediums have appeared—such as John Edward, James Van Praagh, and Sylvia Browne. These mediums claim to have immediate communication with the dead in which they bring messages to bereaved relatives and friends.

Unfortunately, there are virtually no efforts to corroborate what they have said by any kind of independent tests. Their subjective phenomenological readings are accepted at face value by publishers, popular television hosts, and the general public. This phenomenon is startling to skeptical inquirers who had been willing to investigate carefully the question of postmortem survival, but find this kind of "evidence" totally unreliable. Actually these so-called mediums are using familiar "hot" or "cold-reading" techniques, by which they artfully fish for information while giving the impression it comes from a mystical source. What is so apparent is that gullibility and nincompoopery overtake critical common sense and all safeguards are abandoned in the face of guile, deception, and self-deception.

Miracles

Equally surprising is the return of miracles. By the end of the eighteenth century the belief in miracles had been largely discredited by the powerful arguments of David Hume and other skeptical authors. By the nineteenth century it was believed that miracles were a substitute for our ignorance, and that if one examines long enough, one can find natural causal

explanations for otherwise inexplicable phenomena.

The outbreak of reports of miracles in the United States is especially disturbing, since America is supposed to be educationally advanced. There have been a great number of Jesus and Mary sightings, weeping icons and statues, even the return of stigmata. All of these claims, which were considered to be medieval superstitions by educated persons, have been moved to center stage by the media, and tens of thousands of devotees throng to places where miracles are proclaimed. Scientific rationalists thought that the days of miracle-mongering were long gone. Now they have returned with a vengeance.

Intelligent Design

Similarly, the case for intelligent design, long thought to have been discredited in the sciences, has been brought to new prominence. The United States is perhaps the only major democracy in which the theory of evolution is hotly contested and in which a significant percentage of the population still believes in biblical creationism. This battle has been going on in the public schools for many years. What is surprising is the sudden emergence again of the intelligent design argument, such as defended by Michael Behe in his book *Darwin's Black Box*. Arguments for intelligent design are also encountered in physics and astronomy. We are beginning to hear statements that the only way the universe can be explained is by postulating a Grand Designer. How else account for the "fine tuning" that has occurred? they ask, supposing that life could not have existed unless the proper conditions were present, and only an intelligent being could have arranged that. The arguments against intelligent design go back in the history of science; to wit, there is no evidence for a Designer. To read into nature the mind of God in analogy with the mind of Man is a vast postulation, a speculative thesis not based upon scientific evidence. Here we are dealing with a leap of faith, not fact.

Alternative Medicine

One other recent and unexpected development is the rapid growth of "alternative" or "complementary" medicine. A wide range of alternative therapies have become popular, most of them ancient, many of them imported from India and China. The list of these therapies is extensive. It includes acupuncture, qigong, therapeutic touch, magnetic therapy, iridology, naturopathy, reflexology, homeopathy, the extensive use of herbal medicines, esoteric cancer cures, crash diets, and the like.

One must have an open mind about such therapies. They cannot be rejected a priori. Skeptical inquirers have insisted that proposed alternative therapies need to be submitted to double-blind randomized testing. Unfortunately, much of the support for alternative medicine is based on anecdotal hearsay or testimonials by self-proclaimed healers—such as Andrew Weil and Deepak Chopra—and much of this is spiritual in character.

Skeptical inquirers are dismayed by this development because scientific evidence-based medicine has made enor-

mous strides in the past century combating illnesses, extending human life, and mitigating suffering—including the discovery of anesthesia, antibiotics, and modern surgery. Of course, not all diseases have been cured by the medical profession, and so out of desperation many patients turn to alternative therapies. In some cases, if you leave an illness alone, the body will restore itself to health. In others, the placebo effect may have powerful therapeutic value. In any case, the failure of large sectors of the public to appreciate how the scientific method works in medicine is one reason why alternative therapies seem to be gaining ground.

Some Concluding Reflections

The development of the skeptics movement in the last quarter of a century I submit is a very significant event in the history of science; for it helped to galvanize for the first time scientific inquirers who are willing to take part in systematic critical evaluations of paranormal claims.

The basic question that we need to ask is, Why do paranormal beliefs persist? One explanation is because the claims of religions—old and new—are largely unexamined within present-day culture. It is considered to be in bad taste to question anyone's religion. Granted, we ought to be tolerant of other points of view. On the other hand, should claims that are patently false be immune to criticism? There are a plethora of religious denominations in the United States and hundreds of bizarre sects and cults. Religious miracles like paranormal claims postulate a nonnatural transcendental realm that allegedly cannot be evaluated by evidence or reason. The universe is bifurcated into a natural world, which science deals with, and a transcendent spiritual realm, which allegedly lies beyond our ability to comprehend it. Concomitant with these two realms, their proponents insist, are two truths. This dualism is also said to apply to human personality where we confront a "separate soul."

This classical religious outlook had been eroded by the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions and by steady advances in the behavioral and neurological sciences. In spite of this, the spiritual realm is very rarely questioned. In my view it is often difficult to isolate paranormal claims from religious claims. Most skeptical inquirers have said that they wished to deal only with those questions that have some empirical grounding. Interestingly, believers in the paranormal/spiritual worldview have blurred the borderlines between the paranormal and the religious. Religious conservatives and fundamentalists have, of course, been highly critical of New Age astrology, UFOlogy, and psychic phenomena, which they consider to be in competition with traditional religion.

Nonetheless, paranormal phenomena, which allegedly exist over and beyond or beside normal science, are similar to religious miracles. I have labeled religious miracles as "paranatural," for they lie midway between the supernatural and the natural and are amenable to some evidential examination. In this sense,

communication with the dead, the sighting of ghosts, exorcisms, faith healing, prophecies, and prayer at a distance are not unlike UFO abductions, out-of-body experiences, or precognitive predictions—they all are capable of being investigated scientifically.

Unlike many European and Latin American countries, the United States has never had a strong anticlerical tradition. There are few, if any, objective examinations readily available to the public of the so-called sacred literature. Why should reports of miracles in holy books—faith healing, exorcism, the virgin birth and Resurrection, the ascension of Mohammed to Heaven, or the visitation of Joseph Smith by the Angel Moroni—be any less amenable to critical scrutiny than any other extraordinary paranormal reports? Given the current cultural phobia against the investigation of religion, however, I submit that irrationality will most likely continue strong—unless skeptical inquirers within the scientific community (if not CSICOP itself) are willing to use the best standards of science, including archaeology, linguistics, history, biology, psychology, and sociology to uncover naturalistic explanations.

Another explanation for the persistence of the paranormal, I submit, is due to *the transcendental temptation*. In my book by that name, I present the thesis that paranormal and religious phenomena have similar functions in human experience; they are expressions of a tendency to accept magical thinking. This temptation has such profound roots within human experience and culture that it constantly reasserts itself.

Transcendental myths offer consolation to bereaved souls who cannot face their own mortality or those of loved ones. They provide psychological succor and social support, enabling them to endure the tragic elements of the human condition and to overcome the fragility of human life in the scheme of things. We need to ask how and in what sense the transcendental temptation can be modified and whether naturalistic moral and poetic equivalents can be found to satisfy it. I am convinced that belief in the paranormal is a religious or quasi-religious phenomenon: Astrology postulates that our destiny lies in the stars. Psychics maintain that there are untapped extrasensory powers that can probe other dimensions of reality. UFOs transport semidivine extraterrestrials from other worlds. All of these are efforts to transcend the normal world.

Still another factor in the recent growth of the paranormal is the introduction of new electronic media of communication that are radically altering the way that we view the world. Symbols and concepts are being replaced by signs and images: the abstractions of logic by contrived virtual realities. The culture of books is supplemented by the visual and auditory arts. These media express imagery and sound, form and color. Cinematography transforms intellectual content. Science fiction becomes the Sacred Church of the Paranormal. Soaring flights of imagination distort what is true or false. Instead of explicating a thesis, the immediacy of photography in motion seizes us and renders products of fancy as real.

The special problem that we face today is that the dramati-

zation of spiritual-paranormal claims without adequate criticism now dominates the mass media, which are all too often more interested in box-office appeal than accurate information. Huge media conglomerates find that selling the paranormal by means of books, magazines, TV, and movies is extremely profitable. There is too little time devoted to dissenting scientific critiques.

Computers are also rapidly transforming the way information is imparted. The Internet is a vast repository of data bytes that presents a huge quantity of unfiltered claims that can be scrolled without critical analysis. By undermining standards of objectivity, any sentence or utterance is as true as any other, and in this process the methods of logic and science are deemed irrelevant. Added to this is the emergence of post-modernism in the academy, which denies the objectivity of science or the possibility of achieving reliable knowledge.

I believe that the skeptical and scientific community has a special responsibility to help redress the current state of distortion and misinformation. This becomes difficult, however, for science has become overspecialized. Surely, a division of labor is essential if we are to advance the frontiers of knowledge; we need technical experts focused on specific fields of investigation. Yet one reason why the scientific outlook is continuously undermined by antiscience and pseudoscience is because specialists in one field may not necessarily be competent to judge claims in others, nor do they always understand that science primarily is a method of inquiry. Likewise there is insufficient understanding of the broader implications of scientific discoveries to our conception of the universe and our place within it.

I submit that it is incumbent on us to defend the naturalistic interpretation of reality, a materialistic not a spiritual-paranormal account. We need generalists of science who can sum up what science tells us about the human condition in a universe without purpose or design, yet who have the ability to awaken wonder and excitement about the scientific quest itself.

Given the massive cultural fixation on the spiritual-paranormal outlook, perhaps the most that skeptical inquirers can hope for is that we can lessen the excessive follies of its proponents. Perhaps our most effective course is to moderate-untested overbeliefs and encourage critical thinking as far as we can. Our agenda should be to encourage the extension of critical thinking to all areas of life—including religion, politics, ethics, and society.

Looking ahead, I think that we can expect, unfortunately, that spiritual-paranormal beliefs will continue to lure the public. Although the content of their beliefs may change in the light of criticism, some forms of the paranormal will most likely persist in the future. Skeptical inquirers thus will have an ongoing role to play in civilization. Our mission is to light candles in the dark, as Carl Sagan so eloquently stated, and to become Socratic gadflies questioning the sacred cows of society and cultivating an appreciation for reason. □