

THE SKEPTICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Michael Epstein, National Capital Area Skeptics

In this issue I will diverge from the usual survey of local skeptic group activities to concentrate on the general topic of skepticism. I don't have to tell the readers of JSE that the term "skeptic" has become a derogatory label. CSICOP Executive Council member Ray Hyman has been quoted (Hansen, 1992) as saying "As a whole, parapsychologists are nice, honest people, while the critics are cynical, nasty people." That should not be an indictment of skepticism, but rather of some who take extreme skeptical positions.

Skeptics: The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly

The formal history of skepticism goes back to the ancient Greeks, to those like Pyrrho of Elis who founded a school of philosophers who called themselves Sceptics, and taught that nothing whatsoever is certain and that the wise man will suspend judgment on everything. Skepticism has long been labeled as "anti-religion", perhaps because for most of the last two millennia, truths about every facet of life were defined by religious authority. Hansen (1992) has pointed out the large number of CSICOP fellows or consultants who have publicly identified themselves as holding nontheistic or atheistic views. Unfortunately, this derogatory view of skeptics (in a highly theistic society) has been picked up by fundamentalists of all sorts in an attempt to silence critics of their personal belief systems, by labeling them as skeptics. Perhaps this is a good part of the negative connotation of "skeptic" ... but it is an undeserved rap. Religious freedom as we know it today is the direct result of centuries of skeptical questioning of religious truths by those who were, for the most part, believers (Epstein, 1992). Walter Hearn, long-time editor of the newsletter of the American Scientific Affiliation (an organization of scientists of Christian belief) has pointed out that just as atheists sometimes make a pseudoreligion out of scientism, some Christians see scientific skepticism as an enemy of faith. However, gullibility should not be considered a measure of spirituality (Hearn, 1992). Those who are scientifically literate realize that what skeptics have tried to lay to rest is not a biblical but a medieval view of the world — which for many centuries was taken to be the biblical view (Hearn, 1980).

Now that we have hopefully eliminated one stigma associated with skepticism, let's examine scientific skepticism, and in particular, the function of skeptical organizations. Lippard (1993) has written a commentary on the proper role that such organizations should play. In this, he points out that there are two distinct roles: (a) being skeptical and (b) inquiring. The first case, (a) being skeptical, may involve (i) asking for evidence, (ii) offering a refutation

of the evidence, and (iii) offering a reasonable alternative explanation that does not appeal to the paranormal. Where possible, all three modes of response should be invoked to properly address extraordinary claims. Lippard expresses opposition to the belief of CSICOP Fellow C.E.M. Hansel, that simply coming up with a possible non-paranormal explanation (no matter how implausible) is sufficient to reject an extraordinary claim, and feels that Hansel's view is not prevalent in CSICOP. Randi (1981) has stated that Hansel's attitude in this respect (that when analyzing an experiment it is wise initially to adopt the assumption that ESP ... is impossible) is at odds with science and the scientific method.

Lippard rates CSICOP as doing quite well in "being skeptical" of absurd claims, but considers its performance in the area of serious claims to be poorer, because it gives less coverage to such claims. It is in the second distinct role of skeptical organizations, that of "inquiring", that CSICOP and other skeptical organizations have often not met expectations. Lippard suggests raising the publication standards for the *Skeptical Inquirer*, improving the refereeing process, and encouraging more internal criticism of published alternative explanations of paranormal claims. He warns that the failure to draw distinctions between absurd and serious claims in their treatment leads to the unfair equation of parapsychologists and fortune tellers; that skepticism without inquiry leads to an emphasis on debunking; that failure to distinguish nonbelief from disbelief leads to erroneous statements about burden of proof in cases where an alternative explanation is put forth without sufficient evidence; and that skeptics can be misled into the erroneous position that there are no genuine anomalies or that all genuine anomalies can be explained in terms of conventional science. And most important, he points out that no organization or group of individuals can legitimately take the role of the ultimate arbiter of what is true and false in the realm of paranormal and fringe science claims.

As Hyman (1981) pointed out in his critique of Schmidt's PK Experiments, skeptics can either put themselves in an adversarial role, as Hansel (1981) has done, or they can present their arguments in a manner that can be constructive and possibly help researchers to get closer to the truth. This seems to be at the heart of the matter. The contrast between constructive criticism and adversarial polemics can be illustrated by some recent statements by two well-known skeptics. Ray Hyman (1993), in a critique of the recent paper on successful autoganzfeld experiments presented by Daryl Bem at the 1993 meeting of the AAAS, made the following statements. "Taken at face value, the results do seem to show that something beyond chance is occurring ... Bem might be right. Something might be there other than simple artifact. But he is jumping the gun ... any such results would have to be replicated independently ... At this time, I think the most honorable course for skeptics is to be patient."

Contrast that with the hype regarding an upcoming NOVA television program (October 19, 1993) on the paranormal. The message, posted on BITNET skeptic with the source allegedly being James Randi (geller-hotline@ssr.com), describes "some VERY interesting videotape content featured that will not be

at all welcome in certain centers of parapsychological intrigue." It also relates that "New discoveries from several sources will be shown, and there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth in many quarters."

Certainly, skeptics are not always on the side of the scientific majority. Critical attacks have been made by skeptics against the research that resulted in the currently-accepted belief that lead (Pb) intake by children at low levels causes a lowering of IQ ... a belief that will cost the taxpayers millions of dollars for remediation and treatment. Skeptics have attacked the research evidence for the hazards of radon and second-hand smoke, and skeptical creationists are constantly on the lookout for errors in the theory of evolution.

We are all skeptics at one time or another, since we have doubts or suspend judgement about something. The scientific method requires skepticism, whether it involves physics, chemistry, or parapsychology. And certainly, there is also no hard and fast rule that the skeptic must propose an alternative explanation that is in agreement with conventional scientific thought ... if he has sufficient evidence and expertise to back up the proposal. Evaluation of that is what peer review and scientific criticism are all about. In the end, there is nothing bad or ugly about being a skeptic ... but whether believer or skeptic, there is nothing good in being a provocateur.

Skeptics Do Believe in Reincarnation

At least they do when it comes to electronic discussion groups. The SKEPTIC Bitnet group, located at York University (YORKVM1) in Toronto, gave up the ghost in early July. But like the legendary and immortal Phoenix, a new and more vibrant SKEPTIC has risen from the ashes ... thanks to the efforts of Taner Edis (edis@eta.pha.jhu.edu), a graduate student studying condensed matter theory in the Physics and Astronomy Department of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. To subscribe to the list, send e-mail with the instruction "subscribe <your name>" to listserv@jhvm.hcf.jhu.edu. Expect up to twenty or more messages in your e-mailbox every day if you subscribe! Recent topics have included the elusive 'red mercury' trigger for nuclear weapons, telepathy, physics and the paranormal, UFOs including the Linda abduction case, and the activities of James Randi and Uri Geller. The list is archived, with each week being stored in a separate file. The usual way to request them is by e-mail, sending a line "get skeptic log_____" to listserv, the ____ standing for the appropriate log name. If you haven't done this before, send a "index skeptic" to listserv to receive a listing of files available through "get", including the archives.

Honorary Skeptic

Enigmatic parapsychologist George Hansen, whose background includes an interest in dowsing and the SORRAT mini-lab experiments (Berger, 1991), is the author of a recent publication dealing with skeptics and skeptical organizations (Hansen, 1992). He has also recently published critiques of remote-

viewing experiments (Hansen, 1992) and the Linda UFO abduction case (Stefula, Butler and Hansen, 1993). The latter earned him stardom in a recent issue of the *International UFO Reporter (IUR)*, in which he was described as having "the soul of a hater", "behaving as if he has declared war on most of life" (Hopkins, 1993), and taking "the path of character assassination and reputation-trashing" (Clark, 1993). It has been suggested to me that if this continues, he will find himself nominated as a CSICOP consultant.

Last Words

While the following, by Robert T. Weston, may be evidence to some that you can make anything sound "spiritual", it does reflect the philosophy of many skeptics, and is a fitting way to end a discussion of skepticism.

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the handmaiden of truth.
 Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery.
 A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for
 there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief.
 Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false.
 Let no one fear the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief.
 The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by the testing.
 For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure.
 They that would silence doubt are filled with fear; the house of
 their spirit is built on shifting sands.
 But they that fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on a rock.
 They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge; the work of
 their hands shall endure.
 Therefore let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help:
 It is to the wise as a staff to the blind; doubt is the handmaiden of truth.

References

- Berger, A.S., and Berger, J. (1991). *The encyclopedia of parapsychology and psychical research*, (New York: Paragon House).
- Clark, J. (1993). Saucer smearers, *IUR*, 18/2, p 3.
- Epstein, M. (1992). *Skepticism: virtue or vice?*, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Frederick, Maryland.
- Hansel, C. E. M. (1981). A critical analysis of H. Schmidt's psychokinesis experiments, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 5/3, p 26.
- Hansen, G. (1992). CSICOP and the skeptics: an overview, *JASPR*, 86, pp 19-63.
- Hansen, G., Utts, J. and Markwick, B. (1992). Critique of the PEAR remote-viewing experiments, *JP*, 56, p 97.
- Hearn, W. R. (1980). *Gullible's travels*, *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Journal*, Winter 80-81, p 59.
- Hearn, W. R. (1992). *Skepticism: a gift of the holy spirit*, *Graduate Seminar*, New College for Advanced Christian Studies, Berkeley, CA.
- Hopkins, B. (1993). House of cards: the Butler/Hansen/Stefula critique of the Cortile case, *IUR*, 18/2, p 8.
- Hyman, R. (1981). Further comments on Schmidt's PK experiments, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 5/3, p 34.
- Hyman, R. (1993). New developments in parapsychology: ganzfeld and autoganzfeld experiments, *Skeptical Eye*, Vol 7/1, p 4.

- Lippard, J. (1993). The proper role of skeptical organizations, *USENET sci.skeptic*, February 17, 1993.
- Randi, J. (1981). Letter to the editor on Schmidt's PK experiments, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 6/1, p 74.
- Stefula, J. J., Butler, R. D., and Hansen, G. P. (1993). A Critique of Budd Hopkins' Case of the UFO Abduction of Linda Napolitano, *BITNET skeptic*

Opinions expressed in this column are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the National Capital Area Skeptics, JSE, or any other person or organization. Copies of some articles are available on electronic media and others may be available as hard copy. Requests should be directed to:

Mike Epstein, electronic mail at CompuServe: 76640,1540 or Internet: mse@enh.nist.gov or by U.S. post at Michael Epstein, B-222 Chemistry, NIST, Gaithersburg, MD 20899.