

*Commentary***Misguided Stigmatization Of ‘Organized Skepticism’***by Amardeo Sarma*

It was interesting to get something akin to a déjà vu experience, both on reading the latest issue of the *Journal for Scientific Exploration (JSE)* and the subsequent discussion in PhACT’s web message board. It revived memories of being featured as one of the *Chief Dogmatists* of the German skeptics with pictures of two fellow skeptics and myself in the German esoteric magazine *Esotera*.

Now the *JSE* is no *Esotera*, and one might expect some food for thought in an article claiming scientific credentials that criticizes skeptics. This turned out to be a total disappointment, and the broadside against skeptics, PhACT and CSICOP both in the article by L. David Leiter titled ‘The Pathology of Organized Skepticism’ and in the editorial by Henry H. Bauer in the same issue (Vol. 16, no.1), had little resemblance with scientific inquiry. The essay by Leiter intends to be a sociological study of skeptics, but has little more to offer than subjective impressions of talks with some small section of skeptics at PhACT.

Let us look at some of what Leiter has to say:

1. Organized skepticism is different from ‘ordinary’ skepticism and is termed pathological skepticism or pseudoskepticism. After this innovative work of labeling, he airs his astonishment that anyone would like to be called a ‘Skeptic’ (note capital ‘S’ and inverted commas), since everyone should know that this means being an organized, pathological pseudoskeptic.
2. The middle ground (Leiter: between the ‘Skeptic’ and the gullible) is where true science thrives. He goes on to say, ‘Skeptics seem to be far more comfortable on the trailing edge of scientific progress than on the leading edge’.
3. Skeptics have a diametrically different philosophy from that of SSE (Society for Scientific Exploration) people. Skeptics are biased towards disbelief rather than the unbiased scientific mindset.
4. Organized skeptics are pathological skeptics (in his experience with PhACT) because of some childhood or youth experience with a ‘faith-based’ philosophy. Leiter goes on to say, ‘They then throw off this philosophy with a vengeance’ because of an ‘unfortunate experience with a faith-based philosophy’ and then grasp ‘the ultimate non-faith-based philosophy.’
5. Skeptics will not ‘even read significantly into the literature on the subjects about which they are the most skeptical.’ They have a ‘phobia about reading material that is contrary to their views’.
6. They can dish it out, but they can’t take it.
7. Skeptics use ridicule and *ad hominem* attacks against those with differing viewpoints.

My main criticism of both the editorial and Leiter’s article is that it attempts to *stigmatize* organized skeptics in general and CSICOP in particular by negative labels devoid of meaning, such as ‘pathological skeptics’ and ‘pseudoskeptics’; and this without providing the faintest resemblance of reliable data. In a thread on the PhACT message board, Leiter explicitly says: ‘PhACT must vigorously separate and distinguish itself from CSICOP, to avoid CSICOP’s stigma.’ This disqualifies skeptics and allows one to safely ignore their arguments. These are tactics that I strongly argue against if used within skeptics’ organizations against those with opposing viewpoints. The arguments count, not the other’s alleged character.

Also on the PhACT board, poster William Beaty tries to defuse this argument by insisting that it is valid to talk about skeptics’ motives and calling critics labelers of labelers, not realizing that he has thus labeled the labeler of labelers. We could continue this game forever, but let us come to the point: 1) Is it acceptable to conduct a sociological study of skeptics or any other group for that matter? Yes, provided this is done scientifically and with reliable data that can be checked, and by methods that can be replicated. I would be very inter-

continued on next page...

Commentary...continued

ested in the results. 2) Is this what the Leiter article is about? No, clearly not, the assertions and conclusions are not based on science and there is no reliable data. 3) What then is the intention of the article? I cannot look into the minds of Leiter or Bauer (maybe they do better considering one of the topics of their ‘middle ground’), but stigmatization has explicitly been admitted.

Now, are skeptics pathological in Leiter’s vague, ill-defined terms? Let us look at the other claims:

Quite in contrast to what Leiter writes, advances in ordinary science constantly take place, but not in the special sciences of the ‘middle ground’ claimed by the SSE. While areas such as astrology, psi or homeopathy excel in not getting anywhere, ‘dogmatic’ science (in Leiter’s eyes) constantly yields new and astounding results and new insights into the world. Many skeptics are involved in this real groundbreaking work. Colleagues often ask them why they get involved in this ‘middle ground,’ which they see as pure nonsense and a waste of time. In reality, skeptics are far more willing to give the paranormal a fair hearing than most other scientists.

On the other hand, Leiter is right in that skeptics ‘have a different philosophy.’ I think it is perfectly all right to be biased towards disbelief *to start with*. The point is that skeptics are willing to be convinced by adequate evidence. It is just that skeptics have much higher standards about when they accept a new hypothesis. Low standards are also documented in the same edition of *JSE*, where papers in physics that were rejected by peer-reviewed physics journals easily found their way into *JSE*. Considering that most revolutionary claims (though not all) in any area are likely to be wrong, it is better to have a good filter than a lot of rubbish. Putting this differently, our minds should not be so open that our brains fall out and the garbage gets in. Tough inquiry with prior *but not unchangeable* disbelief will ensure that only validated claims get in, not by lowering standards. This is how science works, and with success.

In my 15 years involvement in what Leiter and others call *organized skepticism*, I have so far never come across such a *faith-based* motivation to become a skeptic, and I have never heard of any traumatic conversion from belief to disbelief. I do not rule out that some skeptics may have a *faith-based* past, but so what? This is neither the rule nor even a significant minority. In fact, most skeptics I know were always quite skeptical, even in their youth. I would be extremely surprised if skeptics at PhACT were totally different. It is not surprising that no data, but rather only anecdotal evidence in the form of subjective impressions of conversations with a minute subsection of skeptics is offered for this claim. Quite weak, I would say.

Skeptics do read and write about – as publications by skeptics constantly show – material ‘that is contrary to (our) views’ and I do not recall authors shivering with *phobia* doing so. Again, where is the data, and where are the details? Was it just that Leiter met one person who would not read a certain book he expected the other to read? Has that been generalized again to fit in the author’s prejudice of organized skeptics? There are plenty of examples of skeptics scrutinizing the claims of *JSE* authors, such as Suitbert Ertel. After an analysis by Jan Willem Nienhuys of the Gauquelin ‘Mars Effect’ statistics in the German magazine *Skeptiker* (vol. 9, no. 4), Ertel was given three pages (*Skeptiker*, vol. 10, no. 3) to respond. Ertel then objected to the answer by Nienhuys and its then Editor Edgar Wunder to his own attacks, sued *Skeptiker* and Wunder, and lost three times in a row in court. Following that, Ertel authored long articles with more invalid statistics, some in *JSE*, just to ‘prove’ his side of the argument and keeping more or less silent on objections raised against his methods.

Finally, the author deplors that skeptics ridicule other points of view and that they resort to *ad hominem* attacks. How ridiculous must a point of view get before being allowed to laugh about it? Are *organized skeptics* not supposed to have a sense of humor? It is most amusing to find Leiter close with complaints about *ad hominem* attacks by skeptics, considering that the entire essay and much of the Editorial is devoid of what skeptics actually are wrong about, but rather concentrates on a personal analysis of skeptics’ motivations and on their dishonest behavior apparently as a move to disqualify their arguments *en bloc*.

After having looked at the claims made by Leiter on the motives and wrongdoings of ‘organized skeptics,’

Commentary...from p. 5

albeit with no reliable data to substantiate his claims, let us briefly examine the editorial by Henry H. Bauer in the same issue of *JSE*.

Bauer refers the work of the European (French) author Michel Gauquelin. While Leiter and others complain about skeptics not reading literature “contrary to their views,” is it possible that this applies to people from the SSE? The claim in the editorial is that Gauquelin’s “Mars Effect” has been “so far robust against several attempts to find flaws in the data or in the analysis of it.” They seem unaware (or they ignore) that French skeptics (Claude Benski et al) and Jan Willem Nienhuys (Netherlands) have analyzed the data and clearly identified, after some very hard work, where data has been (voluntarily or involuntarily) biased through selection of data. Maybe Bauer merely counts the number of pages written by Ertel against those written by skeptics to come to his conclusion, instead of checking the arguments. For those interested, I refer to the book *The Mars Effect* by Prometheus Books (1996) and to the article in *Skeptical Inquirer* vol. 21 no. 6 (see also www.skepsis.nl).

The final act of dehumanization – of course this is not *ad hominem* in Bauer’s view – followed when the editor compares skeptics to the Nazis and to the organization that launched the attacks of 11 September 2001. I understand: you do not discuss with Nazis, Islamic fundamentalists or skeptics.

Amardeo Sarma is a founding member and Chairman of the German skeptic’s organization GWUP (Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften – Society for the Scientific Investigation of Para-Sciences) and the Chairman of the European Council of Skeptical Organisations (ECSO). Sarma is also a Fellow, member of the Executive Council and Board member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP).

Letters to the Editor...from p. 2

In the last *Phactum* David Leiter raised the issue of non-skeptical speakers, whether PhACT should invite them and whether they should bother to talk to us.

PhACT’s main purpose is to encourage both its members and the general public to think critically about dubious ideas. My personal justification for taking this position is that by thinking critically you make better life decisions. You will be healthier, wealthier and more productive if you don’t fall for quackery, scams and the blind pursuit of chimerae.

PhACT isn’t promoting some arbitrary point of view. Our job is to evaluate the evidence which others present to justify their views. Our usual speakers demonstrate the value of critical thinking by taking examples of past claims and showing how proper investigation has demonstrated them to be specious. This serves two purposes. It shows critical thinking in action but it also demonstrates that many popular beliefs are groundless. Once this has been established, PhACT has a duty to disseminate this information. And, as Ayn Rand said, “One cannot achieve the victory of one’s ideas by helping to propagate their opposite.”

Proponents of odd ideas should be glad to speak to skeptics. If there are holes in their arguments they are better off knowing about them; think of us as peer reviewers if you will. Everyone prefers a “receptive” audience but preaching to the choir is no way to test your ideas against well-informed criticism. Honest disagreement should not be mistaken for hostility. On the other hand, skeptics are intelligent people with no more wish than anyone else to have that intelligence insulted by preposterous and long-discredited claims. Speakers who have chosen to deliver an anti-skeptical tirade rather than present evidence for their own beliefs have merely demonstrated that they have no case to make.

We occasionally listen to the “other side” for, being skeptics, we are allowed to change our minds. A speaker just might present evidence which would lead us to adopt his position. As Ralph Estling succinctly puts it, “Proof obtained, opinion altered.” That doesn’t mean that PhACT should provide a forum for lost causes.

Tom Napier