

Skeptic Encounters Skeptical Movement

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Abstract – This is the experience report of a skeptic who encounters the skeptical movement. The field of activity of this society is the promotion of scientific and critical investigations in an open discourse. But soon he discovered inconsistencies. The internal customs of the community deviates from the original intentions. Conspicuous are groupthink, self-conceit and the inability to define clear goals. The main reason for the inconsistencies are certain basic principles: metaphysical naturalism and its concept of truth. There are ways out of these difficulties. First steps in a new direction become visible.

Keywords: skeptical movement – naturalism – groupthink – demarcation problem – metaphysics – pseudoscience – conspiracy theories

*Wahrheit ist die Erfindung eines Lügners
(Truth is the invention of a liar)*

Heinz von Foerster

Preliminary Note

In this report I will not mention the names of the acting persons and associations. Anyone who is sufficiently familiar with the skeptical movement should be able to add the missing links and has the opportunity to verify the statements. Whoever does not have this possibility may accept the whole thing as instructive fiction. (I, too, wish that it was in large parts only a dream.)

At the beginning of my controversy with the skeptical movement, there was a dispute about the terms pseudo- and parascience, which finally came to an unspectacular end. The controversy revealed a deeper problem, namely a totalitarian leadership structure, which is dif-

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difficult to discern under the shiny surface, and which forms the background for dogmatism and argumentative narrowing. It is a *shadow organization*. Recognizing this led to the rift, the origin of which will be described here.

Skeptical Movement

Good Goals and Some Excesses

More than fifteen years ago I came across the association on the Internet, a German offshoot of the skeptical movement that had emerged in the USA in 1976. It is dedicated to unmasking allegedly paranormally gifted people; some members of the association devote themselves with particular fervor to mocking followers of alternative, especially homeopathic, healing methods. The target group includes people who do not always and everywhere want to give top priority to the credo of science.

The question is whether the journalistic bluster is appropriate to the relative harmlessness of the target group: the market for allopathic remedies is about a hundred times larger than that for homeopathic remedies. If you consider that homeopathic remedies admittedly have no effect, except perhaps the placebo effect, and therefore probably no harmful effect, then you have to estimate the risks of allopathy to be several orders of magnitude higher than those of homeopathy.

Yes, there are also the skeptics who are honestly concerned about education and fairness. For example, they find it hard to bear that pseudo-scientific homeopathy enjoys state support. The growing presence of pseudosciences at universities due to third-party funding and endowed professorships is worrying for them. And they would like to provide factual information on extraordinary phenomena and claims in the quest to educate consumers. For these skeptics the association is a home.

Despite some obvious exaggerations, there are good reasons to join the association. I liked the self-promotion of the association. It seemed to be a pleasingly colorful mixture of different approaches, united by the conviction “that science and critical thinking are more important than ever for the social challenges of today and tomorrow”. These people wanted to avoid rash judgments and instead give priority to testing “with scientific methods and the tools of critical thinking”.

I have long been interested in the question of what we humans can know at all. In this association, answers are apparently being sought. At the beginning of 2006 I joined the association.

Initial Irritations

The house philosopher of the association – a kind of gatekeeper – entered my life in a way that I found inquisitorial. I remember it that way:

- You are Mr. Grams, new here.
- Yes.
- What do you think of the latest work by Richard Dawkins: *The God Delusion*?
- I read it and I found it disgusting. I'm an agnostic.
- Oh, you're a softened atheist.
- No, I'm a committed agnostic.

The disapproving expression on his face made me suspect that I was out of place here.

At the book table, the gatekeeper showed me and recommended his recently published work, *Über die Natur der Dinge* [On the Nature of Things]. This was an unmistakable indication of how one should act here. Only the convinced atheist is welcome.

Until now I had always thought that skepticism and atheism do not go together. I had not felt any urge to deal with theism, atheism and other metaphysics so far. I actually only wanted an answer to the first of Kant's questions: „What can I know?“ I had immersed myself into Popper's work, and he had spared me such deep-seated problems. Now an absurd problem situation had unexpectedly arisen. I wanted to take a closer look at it.

Guardian of the Truth

It has been around for a long time that webs of lies are sold as truth. Today this happens particularly effectively via the Internet, where the classical gatekeepers are missing: the journalists and moderators. The conspiracy theorists may still be easy to see through, but it is more difficult with the self-proclaimed “skeptics”, who see themselves as guardians of „scientific truth“. What appears to them to be untrue is rejected.

The true skeptic takes an agnostic position, one that says the claim is not proved rather than disproved. His attitude is one of doubt and not of rejection. Critics who take a negative rather than an agnostic standpoint and who still call themselves “skeptics” take this title simply to gain advantage of it. In fact, they are pseudoskeptics. That's the view of a co-founder and later dissident of the skeptic movement: Marcello Truzzi.

To get into the cultural environment of these people, let's look at the vocabulary that these alleged skeptics use against the way of thinking they despise and oppose: Bullshit, mischief, and neologisms like Schwachfug, Dummfug, Blödfug, Schwurbelei (untranslatable). That is condescension – not at all witty. I have taken the words from the relevant blog.

We can see: There are “those in there”, those who hold the truth, and “those out there”, to whom their stupidity must be brought home to the fullest extent. This attitude goes hand in hand with an immaculate self-image and a behavior that blatantly contradicts the self-image; what is striking is the aggression directed against “those out there” as well as against dissidents in their own ranks.

The Propagated Self-Image and its Distortion

This is the self-portrayal of the association that I have in mind: Our group is composed of critically thinking people from different professional and social groups. Our fields of work, world views and political opinions are diverse. However, our common conviction is that science and critical thinking are more important than ever for the social challenges of today and tomorrow. We call ourselves skeptics – that is, we view unusual assertions with skepticism, but we do not reject them hastily. Instead, we test them with recognized scientific methods and the tools of critical thinking.

This noble intention was probably at the beginning of the skeptical movement, founded in 1976 in the USA (Kurtz, 1992, Appendix I) and in 1987 in Germany. Traces of this thinking have persisted until today. Upright warriors like Ray Hyman preserve and carry on these ideals (2001). But overall, the movement has moved away from its roots. This led to the departure of some of the founding members – prominent cases are Marcello Truzzi in the USA and Edgar Wunder in Germany.

The discrepancy between self-advertisement and the facts can be attributed to the growing influence of dogmatic atheists. These fanatics have captured the label “humanism” for themselves. The Giordano Bruno Foundation² is a German version of this movement.

What remains is a tightly-knit group, an outrage community, whose members “know the truth” or at least see themselves close to it. Their indignation is directed at all those who are in error and do not want to learn anything new, e.g. homoeopaths, psi believers, those who decline vaccinations, astrology believers, right up to those who mistrust the blessings of modern agriculture or those who cannot share the belief in technical progress.

2 Giordano Bruno Stiftung (GBS).

A member of the association expressed his disgust for these, in his opinion, retarded and delusional people with a Wikipedia quote: “Delusion is a conviction that hinders the management of life, to which the patient holds on to despite the incompatibility with the objectively verifiable reality. This can lead to a disturbance of the ability to judge.” He writes „I am a skeptic, because I hate stupidity”. This „skeptic” knows „the most important (and perhaps the only?) method to be able to distinguish between true and false”. In his eyes, it is „critical thinking and the verification of claims” that can do this. This, of course, is the method of science. It is about progress in knowledge, *truth is not the issue*.

Atheism is Gaining Momentum

From the beginning, the leaders of the skeptical movement were also secular humanists. They saw themselves as atheists. Until about the turn of the century, however, they kept these areas apart, humanism here, skepticism there.

At the time I joined, there was a change from a more moderate atheism – there are no good reasons for God’s existence and one can be good without God – to a radical and combative attitude, namely that God (most probably) does not exist and that agnosticism is contemptible.

Signposts of this change are the establishment of the Giordano Bruno Foundation (2004), the Manifest des evolutionären Humanismus [Manifesto of evolutionary humanism] by Michael Schmidt-Salomon (2006) as well as the books *Über die Natur der Dinge* by Mario Bunge and Martin Mahner (2004) and *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (2006). This New Atheism is missionary and it undermines secular and ideologically neutral associations.

The upheaval becomes shockingly clear on the occasion of the presentation of the Deschner Prize to Richard Dawkins (critic of religion). The laudator is Karlheinz Deschner himself (Deschner, 2007). The speaker, a critic of the Church *and* a confessing agnostic, does not seem to be very happy at the award ceremony.

The Outrage Community

The outrage community knows only inside or outside, black or white, friend or foe. Knowing oneself to be smarter than all those out there and having this superiority continually confirmed by one’s fellow thinkers: That feels good! That’s how you are someone!

Such a group is welded together by customs, strange language or by a narrative, as they say today. Naturalism offers such a narrative that creates meaning and promotes community: There is only one world, it is uncreated, things are going right in it, and we can recognize it. This nar-

rative provides the “skeptics” with exactly the binding effect that forms them into a group, into a movement of dogmatists.

The sense-giving narrative of naturalism is full of contradictions. The naturalist is getting into a skid about the question whether our thoughts about the world belong to this world or not, just as the believer in God does with the problem of theodicy. But such inconsistencies do not diminish the binding effect of such narratives.

Actually, the content (or better, the coherence of content) of a community-building narrative is of no importance; what matters is that everyone in the group follows it. The Costly Signaling Theory may explain the efforts of some people to even profess their belief in an essentially absurd narrative: Only true believers take on such absurd demands. In this way they prove to each other that they are serious about the group (Dworschak, 2020: 106). This mechanism works for conspiracy theorists, for religions, for world views in general (Wunn, Urban & Klein, 2015).

While preparing this article, I came across the paper „Das Skeptiker-Syndrom“ (The Skeptics Syndrome) by Edgar Wunder in my filing system. This paper reminded me how and when my suspicion of the skeptical movement arose. I do not know when the paper was written. It fell into my hands no later than April 10, 2013, because that’s the day my inserted comments are from.

At that time, I was still enthusiastic about these “skeptics” and the sometimes fierce criticism of this paper aroused my objection. I can see that from my comments at that time. But some things in the paper also described quite well the feeling that had gradually crept over me. Today I know that “The Skeptics Syndrome” is largely correct in the following points:

- Most “skeptics” are dogmatic disbelievers concerning the paranormal.
- The “own group” (in-group, i. e. the “skeptics”), – at least their hard core – is understood as a sworn community of opinion.
- The “own group” is always in a struggle, internal differences of opinion are seen as a hindrance.
- The in-group/out-group polarization is predominant and the point is that we have to fight against them and stick together.
- Being outraged about something is perceived as particularly community-building.
- It is always a matter of true or false.
- These “skeptics” hardly start from open questions, but from answers that are fixed for them.

- If anything is investigated at all, then it concerns a relatively easily invalidated and already very questionable case, such as the obvious charlatanism in the esoteric field.
- For many members, it is a matter of gaining social security in the group for their already firmly held beliefs and prejudices, and of having them socially reinforced by a group.
- The “skeptics” tend to be very broad in their scope and to extend it to questions of religion and belief.
- They have made a habit of always emphasizing their “fundamental openness”, but possible findings that contradict their belief system are hardly ever seriously considered.
- The target group of the association’s publications are the skeptically minded people in the sense of the association. The target group definitely does not include people who are not expected to change to the “skeptical camp”. The editorial staff of the magazine *Skeptiker* must always ensure that only the “right” opinions and information in the sense of the *Skeptiker* are published in the magazine, and if any dissenting opinions appear at all, then only “skeptically” commented on.
- The skeptical movement cannot be reformed for structural reasons. (I am not so sure about this point anymore and hope that this is an exaggeration.)
- Personal expulsions prevent the questioning of group identity.

These characterizations, which are already historical and still largely valid, expose the alleged “critical thinking” of this community as an empty advertising slogan.

The Ideology

Dogmatist is someone who is looking for a justification for his view of the world, and who evades infinite regress or circular reasoning by setting an unquestionable primordial ground.

For those who find the theistic creation story too fantastic, the reasoning process ends with the postulate of a world independent of thought, stating that it is uncreated and governed by law and order. This is how realists and naturalists think.

For both the naturalist and the theist, the world to be explored exists. The prospect of knowledge of the truth about this world is their incentive. The naturalist says: Secrets in the sense of knowledge withheld from us or forbidden to us do not exist; there are good arguments to consider many hypotheses to be true and some even to be objective (Vollmer, 2013: 25).

Both the theist and the naturalist can fall prey to the illusion of being in possession of the truth. In this case he occasionally refers to the “unchangeable laws of nature” and forgets that he

does not even know the laws of nature postulated by him. Postulating their invariance belongs to the assumptions which cannot be tested. What we have is the science and the knowledge created by it is extraordinarily changeable, as history shows. The illusion of truth and the insistence on being right associated with it is the ugly flip side of dogmatism.

Hans Albert has shown that thinking in terms of justification ends up in the Münchhausen trilemma (1991): Only the alternatives of infinite regress, logical circle and dogma remain.

This is unsatisfactory. Albert has shown us a better way to knowledge. In following him the skeptic gives up searching for justification and turns to the critical rationalism of Karl Raimund Popper.

The tentatively setting up of bold hypotheses about the facts of experience, the formulation of mathematical-logical relations and the deductions form the purely rational part of the acquisition of knowledge. Attempts to refute them with the help of already established theories, sharp tests and careful observations make up the critical side. The progress of science is expressed in theories that describe our world of experience better and better and that enable us to achieve great technical feats.

Karl Raimund Popper illustrated this turning away from foundation thinking and onto the new orientation of science in the 30th section of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1980: 111):

Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or “given” base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being.

The German skeptical movement has a dogmatic core. Its dogma is naturalism. Skepticism and dogmatism do not go together, they form a pair of opposites (Gabriel, 2008). The “skeptics” cannot accept this judgment. However, it is made clear by the following passages from the most recent work of the leading dogmatist that my judgment is justified and that they do not deserve the label “skeptics”:

Metaphysical naturalism [is] neither dogmatic nor does it represent an arbitrary choice or setting: We must presuppose it, because it alone provides a coherent and systematic foundation for the possibility and success of the scientific method.³

3 Der metaphysische Naturalismus [ist] weder dogmatisch, noch stellt er eine beliebige Wahl oder Setzung dar: Wir müssen ihn voraussetzen, weil allein er die Möglichkeit und den Erfolg der wissenschaftlichen Methode kohärent und systematisch fundiert (Mahner, 2018: 160).

The dogmatism becomes even clearer in the final chapter: “Metaphysical naturalism is a necessary condition of the real sciences. In this respect it is non-negotiable”⁴

To describe what is and to deny it in the same breath is rabulism and word twisting.

Naturalism serves to justify and evaluate the activities of the skeptical community; this makes it an *ideology*.

Since, according to naturalism, there is only one world, and since this world is largely correctly described by science, and since there is no place in this description of the world for the spiritual, there can be no phenomena for which, according to the state of science, only spiritual forces are possible. Homeopathy, astrology, and telepathy thus fall to damnation. They are defective from the outset. In such cases and many others, precise examinations are therefore superfluous.

This is not skepticism, of any variety. And it has absolutely nothing to do with scientific working methods. Here prejudices are caught and cultivated.

The Players

The hard core of the movement is ideology-obsessed. It consists of a handful of people. Some other members follow the ruling ideology, but maintain the customs of scientific discourse and decency. There are friendly followers and most of them do not care about ideology. There may be an above-average number of atheists in the association: 50% of the membership versus 30% of the population (Mestel et al., 2016). Most are closer to agnosticism than to the New Atheism – according to my impression. The skeptic movement has as likely as not also received its fair share of crackpots – with and without PhDs. None of this is worrying and leaves room for decent and fruitful discussions. The calamities come from the control centers of the organization, because ideologists can be found there.

There is just this core – dogmatic, combative, fanatical and without exception New Atheists in the sense of Richard Dawkins. For them the agnostic is an even worse contemporary than the priest.

An ideologically based organization needs a committed leadership. An honorary position cannot do this. The role of a figurehead remains for the chairman. He takes care of the friendly face of the organization.

4 „Der metaphysische Naturalismus ist eine notwendige Bedingung der Realwissenschaften. In dieser Hinsicht ist er unverhandelbar“ (Fazit, *ibid.*: 185).

For the tight regiment a permanently employed management is necessary. This management implements its agenda and does not bother about the legitimation by statutes or majority decisions. It uses its own instruments of control and power.

The managing director of the association is a dogmatist and ideologically driving force. He holds all business-relevant threads firmly in his hands. The mail traffic runs through him. Before forwarding to the board of directors or the advisory board, he occasionally inserts his comments into the letters to prevent these representatives elected by the association from giving free rein to their thoughts. This is how I imagine the work of totalitarian regimes.

“Critical thinking”, conjured up in the association’s mission statement, has no chance there. Should a member of the community, who is otherwise considered to be quite docile, give a dissenting opinion of himself, he will be castigated. After such a misstep, a professed university teacher was humiliated with this remark disguised as a joke: “I would like to see an extra portion of ashes on your head tomorrow on Ash Wednesday!” The scientist apologized – like a scolded altar boy.

There is a magazine and a blog in this association. Their chief reporter has little to do with science and ideology, but a lot with the indignation against those who think differently. His specialty is malice and belittlement, which he apparently confuses with humor. For his attacks he quotes the “unchangeable laws of nature”, among other things. He counters the objection that the idea of the unchangeable laws of nature is ultimately a matter of faith: “Sure, I’m about to have a break, I’m going to jump from the fourth floor – I’m sure that gravity is only a matter of faith.”

Whoever dares to criticize the prescribed line of approach is a troll, a troublemaker, a ghost driver. He is bullied. The biting dogs are responsible for this job. Whoever joins this internal discussion group and criticizes the prescribed line of approach, quickly notices who belongs to this mob.

This is what I have learned: Even basically nice people can become a mob in which decency is only demanded from outsiders and deviants. This is the effect of narratives that can infect the brain like a parasite and virtually abduct it. (Here I take a picture that Richard Dawkins used in his acceptance speech after receiving the Deschner Prize. For him, the parasite stands for the belief in a religion).

Pseudoscience – Parascience

Not only the external presentation of the association attracted me. The purpose of the association corresponded to my very worldly ideas, which were not burdened by metaphysics. “Pseudo-sciences are systems of statements which claim to be scientific without fulfilling it;

parasciences are those which are doubtful whether they meet this claim”.⁵ The described field of work and target area of the association was and is to my taste.

The background of this definition is the demarcation criterion of Karl Raimund Popper. He is interested in statements, propositions and the systems of statements formed from them in experiential science. Such an empirical scientific system must be able to fail because of experience, he says (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, “6. Falsifiability as a Criterion of Demarcation”). This criterion of falsifiability in principle serves Popper to distinguish scientific systems of statements from non-scientific and especially metaphysical systems.

Towards the end of 2009, however, I realized that something was changing in the association. I came across several publications of the in-house philosopher on the topic „Parawissenschaft – Pseudowissenschaft“. There I found something new:

A parascience is a field of knowledge outside the sciences whose theory and practice are largely based on illusory thinking. “Parascience” is therefore a newer word formation based on the term “parapsychology”, which makes it possible to limit the term “pseudoscience” to its narrower meaning.⁶

This led me to suspect that there is more at stake than the classical pseudosciences, but that the field of work of the association should be extended to religions. This becomes clear in an article in the association’s magazine. Under the heading „Was sind Parawissenschaften?“ [What are parasciences?] we can find the following statement: After all, religions can also fall under this heading, insofar as they make knowledge claims.⁷ So *the religions* in their totality are at stake, not only their knowledge claims.

The study of the sources revealed to me that this redefinition has an ideological basis; it is based on the metaphysics of naturalism, which provides information about the nature of things. And he who has recognized such eternal truths can also allow himself to judge to what extent others come close to this truth, to what extent their thinking provides true knowledge, or whether it is illusory.

5 „Unter Pseudowissenschaften werden Aussagesysteme verstanden, die Anspruch auf Wissenschaftlichkeit erheben, ohne ihn einzulösen; unter Parawissenschaften solche, bei denen Zweifel besteht, ob sie diesem Anspruch genügen“ (statutes of the GWUP from 14.5.2010).

6 „Eine Parawissenschaft [...] ist ein außerhalb der Wissenschaften [...] angesiedelter Erkenntnisbereich, dessen Theorie und Praxis weitgehend auf illusionärem Denken beruhen [...] ‚Parawissenschaft‘ ist daher eine neuere, an die Bezeichnung ‚Parapsychologie‘ angelehnte Wortbildung, die es erlaubt, den Begriff ‚Pseudowissenschaft‘ auf seine engere Bedeutung zu beschränken“ (Mahner, 2010: w.p.).

7 „Schließlich können auch Religionen darunter fallen, insofern sie Erkenntnisansprüche erheben“ (Mahner, 2009: 188).

This aroused my contradiction. It was followed by a rather unedifying quarrel, which also came about because I had underestimated the potential that lies in this question of definition.

A Serious Objection

There is indeed a lack of definition. A serious objection to the original definition of pseudo-science or parascience was made by Larry Laudan in his paper “The demise of the demarcation problem” (1983).

He writes that Popper’s falsification criterion ennobles all kinds of strange ideas with the seal of scientificity if they make refutable statements. In fact, we find plenty of examples such as astrology, the idea of a flat earth, homeopathy, perpetual motion, thought telepathy, clairvoyance, etc. In all these cases, if we follow Popper’s criterion it is indeed science. Laudan thinks that the criterion of falsifiability does not offer any argument against these statement systems. It is not suitable to classify everything that we understand as pseudo-science as such.

This problem was not a problem for me at first. If a discipline refers to disproved statement systems and claims that it is science, then for me this is pseudoscience. But exactly this is not written in the statutes of the association. I should have taken this problem of demarcation more seriously.

The house philosopher offered a solution to the problem. For him, “illusionary thinking” is a characteristic of the parasciences. He believes that illusionary thought patterns are in conflict with reality and with the unchanging laws of nature from the outset. The only problem for him is that we do not always recognize this conflict immediately. According to this thinking, homeopathy is a pseudoscience from the very beginning.

Guided by naturalism, even the religions come into the field of view of the skeptics – as planned. The protest of the agnostic is the inevitable consequence.

I attribute to my objection that this metaphysical way out was not taken. The term “illusionary thinking” is still in an official paper of the association, but it has not found its way into the statutes. Instead, there is now (since 2015) a vague definition of the term “parascience”: Parascience includes above all that which is understood in public as superstition, esotericism, occultism, and pseudoscience.

The term pseudoscience is used in the definition, but remains undefined itself. The problem of demarcation is therefore not solved, but only circumvented.

A Result of a Discussion

In my opinion, Popper's demarcation criterion still plays the main role in the thinking of the vast majority of skeptics. Why and how – this was made clear by a pleasantly open discussion in a small but objective and committed circle. I have summarized the result of this discussion from summer 2019 in a definition. The discussion revealed the need for a further distinction. The term “pseudoscience” refers to both *statement systems* and *disciplines*. If it were only about statement systems, the criterion would, in fact, hardly be helpful.

In the case of *statement systems* – hypotheses and theories – Popper's demarcation criterion of falsifiability comes into play; we have science on one side, non-science including metaphysics on the other. The classification of a statement system as scientific or non-scientific is independent of time.

Disciplines are fields of work that are determined by propositions, methods and rules of conduct. Whether a discipline is scientific or not can change over time. Thus we arrive at this definition:

The following are considered *pseudosciences*

1. non-testable, in particular metaphysical *statement systems*, which appear with the claim of scientific validity and
2. *disciplines* that continue to support already refuted scientific statements.

This definition is completely secularistic. It stands alone without metaphysics and is also not suitable as a “weapon” against religions in general, unless they claim to be scientific, such as the Intelligent Design movement.

Thus, a tiresome dispute has come to a rather unspectacular end. The skeptical movement could have had this succinct solution to the problem of demarcation much earlier. But unfortunately a dogma got in the way. This had to be cleared away firstly. A little more skepticism would certainly have helped the skeptical movement.

Skepticism Unchained

What about Religion?

Naturalism is accompanied by the illusion of possessing the key to truth. We have seen how this metaphysics can distract the eye from the obvious. It was only with some effort that we got the sustainable essential core of the skeptic movement into the focus. Its mission is to educate the

public about science and especially its methods and to inform about pseudoscientific claims according to the state of scientific knowledge. So far, so good.

The border crossing in the direction of religion did not really work out. It was followed – at least in Germany – by a retreat. The now valid strategy paper speaks of a division of labor, according to which the Giordano Bruno Foundation, allied through joint memberships, takes over active atheism. The skeptical movement can thus present itself as neutral to the outside world.

Where is the Positive?

The negative thinking cultivated towards the pseudosciences and the nevertheless very limited field of activity are perceived as unsatisfactory. For the well-being of one's self something positive has to be found.

Progress apologists such as Michael Shermer, Steven Pinker and Hans Rosling find much applause in the skeptical movement. Since they are committed to the progress of knowledge, and since these people see society as being on the right path, which is due to scientific and technical progress, they gladly adopt their view (Shermer, 2016). Positive thinking attracts attention.

Those who believe they know “what holds the world together at its core” also dare to take a stand with *positive* and well-founded assertions. This has been demonstrated in statements per glyphosate and per nuclear power. I understood the publications in the association's media as a promotion for the farmers' association and for the nuclear power lobby, disguised as a grass-roots movement. Astroturfing is the name of the game.

Of course this is incompatible with classical skepticism. A redefinition of what is meant by skepticism was therefore inevitable. This redefinition is offered by an essay titled “Skepticism Reloaded” (Sarma, 2018). While Greek skepticism denied that we could acquire knowledge and discouraged making judgments and taking a stand, the *New Sceptics* were different. They would take positions and were committed to *scientific realism*.

I counter this: Anyone who thinks that science provides tenable standpoints on controversial questions is falling prey to the presumption that he can derive the “ought” from the “is”. Immanuel Kant tells us with all his intellectual power that this does not work. To the questions “What can I know?” and “What should I do?” he dedicated two of his major works, namely, first, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [Critique of Pure Reason] and second, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [Critique of Practical Reason].

In his introduction to the second book, Kant writes:

The theoretical use of reason dealt with objects of the cognitive power alone, and a critique of reason with regard to this use concerned in fact only the pure cognitive power, because this power raised the suspicion—which was indeed confirmed thereafter—that it might easily stray beyond its bounds, losing itself among unattainable objects or even among concepts conflicting with one another. With the practical use of reason the situation is indeed different. In this use, reason deals with determining bases of the will [...] Hence the critique of practical reason as such has the obligation to keep the empirically conditioned reason from presuming to seek to provide, alone and exclusively, the determining basis of the will. (Kant, 2002: 23–24)⁸

In my eyes, it is imposture in the name of science, if leading “scientific skeptics” take standpoints, pass these off as solely scientifically founded, and thus consider them to be binding for the community of skeptics.

Every man takes a standpoint now and then, has his own opinion on this or that. It serves the purpose of conceptual clarity if one does not attribute this to his skepticism. Skepticism is simply not responsible for the positive. This is what other areas of our life are for, areas in which there is space for fantasy, illusion, metaphysics, art, literature, music, and also for error. The creative force of error drives evolution. This is how the “New” is created – more or less good and also sometimes useless or even harmful. Skepticism then takes care of the clearing up, the selection of the Good, if you will.

The propagated statements in favor of glyphosate and nuclear technology met with resistance from some members of the association. They recognized that the constitution of the association did not contain any mechanisms for agreement that could cope with the pluralism of views and standpoints. Since then, I have not heard any comments on glyphosate and nuclear technology in the association’s media. The association does not seem to have completely lost its ability to criticize and learn.

The trouble with positive thinking has shown that philosophy with its promise of truth has shown a wrong way also here. For those who feel the urge to engage these philosophies (onto-

8 Der theoretische Gebrauch der Vernunft beschäftigt sich mit Gegenständen des bloßen Erkenntnisvermögens, und eine Kritik derselben in Absicht auf diesen Gebrauch betraf eigentlich nur das reine Erkenntnisvermögen, weil dieses Verdacht erregte, der sich auch hernach bestätigte, dass es sich leicht über seine Grenzen unter unerreichbare Gegenstände oder gar einander widerstreitende Begriffe verlöre. Mit dem praktischen Gebrauche der Vernunft verhält es sich schon anders. In diesem beschäftigt sich die Vernunft mit Bestimmungsgründen des Willens. [...] Die Kritik der praktischen Vernunft überhaupt hat also die Obliegenheit, die empirisch bedingte Vernunft von der Anmaßung abzuhalten, ausschließungsweise den Bestimmungsgrund des Willens allein abgeben zu wollen. (Kant, 2011b, AA 15)

logical/metaphysical/scientific realism/naturalism) and to explore their inner contradictions, I recommend the works of Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam.

Consider carefully whether you want to get involved with these philosophies. Immanuel Kant has issued a warning against such thought experiments. At any rate, this is how I interpret the words from the section „Antithetik der reinen Vernunft“ [Antithetic of pure reason] of his work *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1787)[Critique of Pure Reason]:

If in using principles of the understanding we apply our reason not merely to objects of experience, for the use of principles of understanding, but instead venture also to extend these principles beyond the boundaries of experience, then there arise *sophistical* theories, which may neither hope for confirmation in experience nor fear refutation by it. (Kant, 2005: 467)⁹

Kant was of the opinion that such problems cannot be solved, but can at best be “rendered harmless”.

Conspiracy Theories

That the skeptical movement can expand its field of work without invoking metaphysics, and also without the presumption of moral competence, is realized with its commitment to enlightenment about conspiracy theories.

The right-wing extremist terrorist attacks with a corresponding background and the whispering in the course of the Corona crisis are sufficient reason to deal with these abstruse stories about vaccination dictatorship, QAnon, New World Order and many other things.

The skeptic’s instruments are sufficient to dismantle fake news and conspiracy theories. Nothing positive needs to be brought about; beyond that, metaphysical support is not necessary. Only the negative method is used, i.e. look closely and check.

Conspiracy theories have nothing to do with science in the common sense. They lack the essential characteristics of empirical science, namely generalizability, falsifiability and objectivity, i.e. intersubjective verifiability. A claim in this regard is also not discernible. Conspiracy theories are not pseudoscience; superstition, esotericism and occultism are also only occasional additions. Basically, the skeptic movement crosses a self-imposed boundary by including conspiracy theories in its work and target area.

9 Wenn wir unsere Vernunft nicht bloß zum Gebrauch der Verstandesgrundsätze auf Gegenstände der Erfahrung verwenden, sondern jene über die Grenzen der letzteren hinaus auszudehnen wagen, so entspringen *vernünfteln*de Lehrsätze, die in der Erfahrung weder Bestätigung hoffen, noch Widerlegung fürchten dürfen. (Kant, 2011a: 362)

The skeptic in the classical sense is not limited to such a narrow definition of purpose. For him the negative method, close observation and examination, is decisive. And he can apply this method to all kinds of things, including conspiracy theories.

This does not happen as if it were in a laboratory, but rather as if it were in a courtroom. One will often have to be satisfied with circumstantial evidence for or against. But even without further examination, the skeptic is allowed to conclude that, as experience shows, large-scale, secret and long-lasting conspiracies with several initiates cannot work at all. This already results from the futility of large-scale social planning, which Karl Raimund Popper pointed out in his work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945).

Skepticism Within Wide Limits

In dealing with conspiracy theories, I see a liberation of the skeptical movement from its close involvement with what it calls the parasciences. This case is not about pretended science, superstition or esotericism. In the wake of this border crossing, the question arises of a modern understanding of skepticism, a skepticism that is free of unnecessary restrictions and that also does not open the door to arbitrariness.

What we mentally build, cultivate and justify is what is *the existing*. Existing is the language, its concepts, all kinds of systems of expression such as scientific hypotheses and theories, as well as works of art, music, statements, points of view, opinions, moral concepts, value systems. Starting from phenomena and facts, the existing has been created by creative processes with substantial participation of chance.

The method of the skeptic is the *negative method*. It describes how we work through the existing, by examining, doubting, selecting. It is dominated by reason. This dichotomy corresponds to our idea of natural evolution based on chance and necessity.

The skeptic avoids saying “The theory A is correct” or “A is better than B”. He can say “A is contradictory in itself” or “A contradicts B”. Also: “A has in the light of experience Z been corroborated better than B” or “The theory A has proved itself better than all competing theories”. Such a superior theory can be added by the skeptic to his *knowledge*. This knowledge is preliminary and can be corrected. Progress in knowledge is possible for the skeptic, too.

With this view the skeptic approaches *positivism*. At least Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno see it that way (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). But they also interpret the term very broadly. For them, positivism is everything that refers to facts and applies logic, mathematics and probability theory to them. Karl Raimund Popper defines the term more narrowly. For

him there is no positive justification. In particular, our attempts at solutions cannot prove to be probable (in the sense of the probability calculus) (Adorno et al., 1993: 106).

The pragmatic skeptic is not very interested in this dispute. He is okay with the accusation of positivism if it means only that he recognizes theories as knowledge as long as there is good evidence for them and their refutation is pending. The validity of inductive inferences, positive justification, is not the skeptic's business.

Skepticism is characterized by the negative method: look closely, check and criticize. Apparently, a huge field of application is open to it. By its very nature, the skeptical movement avoids positive approaches: There are no ideological postulates, and there are no mechanisms for developing statements. Such things belong just as little to the object area of skeptics as the making of suppositions and theories. Critical thinking is their business, not the creation of bold intellectual buildings.

In the last fifteen years I have seen a shadow organization of the skeptical movement violate the boundary thus drawn. All these boundary violations are caused by the belief in the unchanging natural laws of an uncreated world, the illusion of knowing what truth is, and the awareness of being particularly close to this truth. The result is excrescences that have nothing to do with the nature of skepticism, no matter what form it takes, and even contradict it directly.

Points of view presuppose valuations. The evaluation of the same scientific facts may well lead to opposing viewpoints. The evaluation of GMOs (genetically modified organisms), for example, depends on whether one is more inclined to the prudent avoidance principle (as in Europe) or to strict product liability (as in the USA). The personal choice also depends on whether globalization is considered a priority or whether one is more interested in strengthening the autonomy of the regions. Some are more progressive, others conservative.

Value systems are not anchored in the statutes of the skeptical movement on principle. It is all about science. If the skeptical movement wants to cultivate pluralism of world views and values within its ranks, the only way to do so is through the democratic process of voting. But this can no longer be handled within the framework of the skeptical movement. For this there is the social discourse, the parties and the parliaments. There is also a place for a skeptic in it.

Since skepticism has strict limits, it occupies only a part of our lives. For some, this part is large, for others rather small. On the other hand, we have positive impulses, opinions, values and emotions. *We are not just playing one game.* A relationship similar to the one between our positive nature and the negative is that between intuition and reflection, between emotion and reason (Grams, 2020).

I think it is an ongoing task of a skeptic to escape the pull of scientism. Facts, logic, mathematics, probability theory – the whole range of positivist instruments lures with knowledge of truth. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno warn: “What appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002: 20).¹⁰

This is matched by the touching lament that Charles Darwin leaves us at the end of his autobiography (Barlow, 1958: 112–113):

I have said that in one respect my mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years. Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds [...] gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost any taste for pictures or music. – Music generally sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure.

Darwin continues:

My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. A man with a mind more highly organised or better constituted than mine, would not I suppose have thus suffered; and if I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied could thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.

Conclusion

I consider the skeptical movement to be reformable. At least that is my hope. It could have a greater impact than it has so far by following the great skeptic Carl Sagan:

And yet, the chief deficiency I see in the skeptical movement is in its polarization. Us vs. Them – the sense that we have the monopoly on the truth; that those other people who

¹⁰ „Was als Triumph subjektiver Rationalität erscheint, die Unterwerfung alles Seins unter den logischen Formalismus, wird mit der gehorsamen Unterordnung der Vernunft unters unmittelbar Vorfindliche erkaufte“ (Horkheimer, Adorno, 2017: 33).

believe in all these stupid doctrines are morons; that if you're sensible, you'll listen to us; and if not, you're beyond redemption. This is unconstructive. It does not get the message across. It condemns the skeptics to permanent minority status; whereas, a compassionate approach that from the beginning acknowledges the human roots of pseudo-science and superstition might be much more widely accepted. (Sagan, 1996: 300)

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