

TIMM GRAMS

Can the Skeptics Still be Helped?

Henry Bauer underlines that skepticism, according to common understanding, means agnosticism and not atheism, whereas the self-proclaimed skeptics believe in the currently prevailing science and reject everything that seems to contradict it. Thus he is on the same line as Edgar Wunder and me. His experience with Paul Kurtz deepens the insight into the structure of the skeptical movement, into the prevailing groupthink there and the disregard for scientific customs.

In my opinion, the group of skeptics also tends to dogmatize mainstream science. Bauer mentions some areas of conflict about which I cannot say much. Only one point stands out to me that I would like to set straight. The increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which Bauer mentions, is now seen worldwide as the main cause of climate change. The skeptic movement has contributed to this formation of opinion within its modest framework, but it was certainly not decisive. I am more disturbed by the fact that leading representatives of the movement combine the advocacy of reducing carbon dioxide emissions with the imperative of expanding nuclear energy. In this way, they display the “misguided presumption that they can derive the ‘ought’ from the ‘is’” – in contradiction to Hume’s law.

Bauer aptly points out a point of divergence between our opinions. I, unlike him, actually think Popper’s criterion of falsifiability is strong enough to provide a first useful assessment of whether one is dealing with science. It is astonishing that it is not only questioned from his side, but also by his opponents, the skeptics: Since atheism cannot be justified scientifically with falsifiability, one needs sharper tools than the falsification criterion, namely *ontological naturalism*.

The demarcation criterion says nothing about appreciation and preference of one or the other side. In chapters 2, 6, 7 and 8 of his collection of essays *Conjectures and Refutations*, Karl Raimund Popper – certainly no enthusiast for the occult – brings a number of examples from the history of science showing the importance of mystical and metaphysical thinking for the emergence of new theories (Popper, 1963/1989). Among other things, the Pythagorean numerology is a source of atomism; Newtonian mechanics arose from myths; the religious Neoplatonic idea that the sun is due the highest place in the universe was the starting point of the Copernican turn. Metaphysics undeniably plays an important role in the preliminary organization of science.

Dean Radin says that the goals propagated by the skeptic organizations are laudable, but that their actions do not match them. This is my experience: The materialistic world view, natural-

ism, limits the field of vision. Consciousness and subjective experiences are not really accommodated in it. This leads to deliberate blindness to psi phenomena, for example. Experiments are seen as unnecessary because the answer is known in advance. These people perform psi tests, but these are mainly for publicity. The tests are far too crude to detect weak but spectacular psi gifts, assuming that they exist at all. I pointed this out in a satirical article. It was even printed in the association's journal, a positive sign that there are still residual abilities for self-criticism in the skeptical movement (*Skeptiker 2/2020*: 104–106).

I believe that science's engagement with psi phenomena at least has the effect of sharpening its tools. The small effect sizes suspected in this field, if they exist at all, require good magnifying glasses if they are to be clearly seen.

Small effect sizes combined with the large amount of testing required to make psi visible, even from a parapsychology perspective, begs the question of whether the effort is really worth it. There is something comparable in mainstream science: One question that is still open today is whether the neutrino has a mass. If it does, it is very small. So far, the equipment has only been suitable for finding upper limits for the mass. A convincing proof of existence is still lacking. Here, too, the question of effort arises.

But I do not want to be unfair: It is difficult to set off benefit and effort against the researcher's interest. This applies to science as well as to its border areas. You may not find what you are looking for, but you may find other things. The effort is worth it for the unexpected. That's how creativity works.

The statement that 99.7 per cent of the world's universities studiously ignore what the majority of the world's population believes worries me less than Radin: Science is basically supposed to rise above popular belief – otherwise we wouldn't need it.

Chris Roe speaks in his introduction of the permanent conflict between representatives of parapsychology on the one hand and the skeptical movement on the other. Since I am not inclined to dwell on issues that have been in dispute for a very long time and for which a solution is still out of sight, I will limit myself to the points on which Roe addresses me directly and to which I would like to add something.

He speaks of the limit that science comes to in respect to social and psychological phenomena, and consciousness in particular. This limit became particularly clear to me when I addressed the topic of consciousness at the turn of the year. On 28.12.2020, I published the article "Das fünfte Welträtsel: Bewusstsein" (The Fifth World Puzzle: Consciousness) in my *Hoppla!* blog; Stephan Schleim took it over to his blog MENSCHEN-BILDER (conceptions of

man). This led to extensive discussions, in which naturalists of the skeptical movement also intervened. Their statements confirm what can be read here about the prejudices and certainty of truth pertinent to the self-proclaimed skeptics.

Of course, I agree with Roe when he says that ideas that pass Popper's demarcation criterion of falsifiability must still pass the tests. Only the tests that are passed can ennoble the ideas into proven hypotheses and thus into theories that can be incorporated into science. That is where the problems begin.

In the case of the suspected psi phenomena, the effects are by all appearances relatively small. Low-power statistical studies are prone to miss any psi phenomena that may be present. Roe is right in saying that meta-analyses that combine many such tests can sharpen the view. However, this cannot be done without hesitation. The researcher's preferences may affect the outcome of the meta-analysis. The selection and weighting of studies depend on the individual judgment of suspected cases of questionable research practices such as fishing for significance. This then leads again to the inconclusive continuation of the dispute between psi researchers and their critics from the skeptical movement.

In my opinion, the accusation that skeptics do not conduct empirical studies themselves does not reflect the self-image of the skeptical movement. Conducting their own studies is secondary to their purpose. The movement is primarily concerned with "informing the public about para- and pseudoscientific claims on the basis of the current state of scientific knowledge" (GWUP statutes). The movement's motivation is not to be blamed. Rather how the movement pursues its goals.

Mark Benecke's contribution is fitting and it stands on its own. „I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good knowing he's out there, the Dude. Takin' 'er easy for all us sinners.“ (The Stranger)

René Gründer analyses the fundamental lines of conflict between the different modes of "knowledge" and "belief" and their dependence on the point of view. I find this illuminating.

His classification of our contributions "as more focused on the 'organizational culture' (Grams) and as more focused on the 'mindset' of the skeptics – i.e. the structures of their interpretation of the world (Wunder)" captures my intention quite well.

I question whether the categories common in the 1960s – on the one hand the political activist groups of the left spectrum and on the other hand the reactionary or bourgeois understanding of science – allow an accurate classification.

As far as I can see, it is not possible to classify the skeptical movement as belonging to one of these groups. Political issues are left out of internal discussions. This experience fits here: When I tried in 2019 to include in the statutes of the German “Skeptics” the usual passage for non-profit associations, “The association is neutral with regard to politics and ideology”, I was met with the counter-argument that the association was quite obviously apolitical, and that there was no other way, as the recent Attac ruling showed. Only a few months ago, on January 10, 2019, the Federal Fiscal Court ruled that the Attac organization was no longer to be considered a non-profit organization due to its political purposes; subsequently, it lost its tax privileges. Thus, the reference in the statutes that “the association should be neutral with regard to politics” would indeed be superfluous, and a change in the statutes would consequently be unnecessary. My real concern, i. e. to underline the non-ideological character of the association, was lost. I gave in. The assembly, including myself, had fallen for a red-herring argument. I have learned at least one thing from this: Political orientation is not an issue in the skeptic movement.

The attribution of affinity for technology and belief in progress to this group fits better than a political classification. It actually “sees itself as dedicated to the progress of mankind”.

Gründer refers to Stephan Schleim when he says “that religion and natural science do not necessarily represent mutually exclusive systems of interpretation at the level of the person of the scientist”. This is precisely what I have argued in several meetings of the “skeptics” and have not been able to get through with it.

One thing is still close to my heart: I do not want my criticism of the skeptical movement to be understood as a “conversion account, or better, an intellectual ‘settling of accounts’ with a lost spiritual home”. My criticism is directed against unhealthy admixtures to a contemporary skepticism. Gründer also says approvingly, “thus, the existence of a socio-political corrective to inform about the risks of inappropriate homeopathic treatments and their promises of healing as well as about the psycho-social risks of parts of the esoteric market still seems necessary”.

Furthermore, I doubt the success of “an analysis [of the skeptic organization GWUP] by actors not personally involved in conflict in this field”. I consider criticism from within to be more effective. It must gradually dawn on the actors that atheism and modern skepticism do not go together.

The humanists closely associated with the skeptical movement seem to be tearing it apart right now. On one side we have evolutionary humanism closely associated with the New Atheism and on the other side we find the supporters of a secular state tolerant of religions. The clearest sign is provided by this news item from the Humanist Press Service (hpd) of 22 April 2021: “On 19 April, the American Humanist Association (AHA) declared that it was denying Richard

Dawkins the title of 'Humanist of the Year' awarded in 1996." If one puts this in perspective, one should know that Richard Dawkins, a main proponent of the New Atheism, is a figurehead of evolutionary humanism. He has received the Deschner Prize from the Giordano Bruno Foundation, which is active in this field.

The rift that runs through the modern humanist movement becomes strikingly clear in the laudatory speech of the prize donor to the first laureate. Obviously, the agnostic Karlheinz Deschner is not quite comfortable at the celebration in honor of the militant atheist Richard Dawkins. The video of the speech has unfortunately disappeared from the internet in the meantime. The text of the speech can be found in the Alibri volume *Vom Virus des Glaubens* (2018: 13–20; [On the Virus of Faith]).

Ulrich Magin does not regard the skeptic movement as a scientific endeavor, but as a lobby group. When he notes that this lobbying is, on the one hand, "an integral part of the skeptics' self-image" and, on the other hand, that this self-image also includes investigating "pseudo-science" objectively and soberly, he is describing irreconcilable things. I have noticed this tension, too; but I have also found attempts to alleviate it.

In my *Hoppla!*-blog I write:

What I'm seeing at the moment is propaganda with a lot of moralistic swagger: "Current German and European policies are partly responsible for the blindness of children and for not fighting world hunger more effectively."

Thus the skeptic movement becomes a propaganda machine. The question arises: in whose sense, actually? Is this about the interests of the farmers' association? But then money should also flow.

This could be expanded: for the energy supply companies, for the car industry, for the pharmaceutical industry, and so on. The Skepticism Reloaded paper emphasizes that among the primary goals of the skeptical organizations is the generation of income streams, and that: as large and as permanent as possible.

I have seen approaches of a fake grassroots movement in favor of nuclear technology with significant participation of a senior member of the skeptic movement. I described it in my blog under the keyword "astroturfing".

I note with reservation that the pro-glyphosate and pro-nuclear activities emanate from a few members and that they do not, in my opinion, enjoy broad support within the association. Lobbying, where the desired money also flows, is probably not compatible with the non-profit status of the association. What individual members do is of little concern to me, unless they use

the association media for their lobbying. As far as I can see in these three publications, the relevant blog, the association's newspaper and public appearances, the boundaries are not crossed into clear lobbying. Sometimes we have come close, but some of the members have raised their hands and made the boundaries clear.

I repeat what I already said about Gründer's contribution, resistance to border crossings must come from within. Because of the distinct group behavior of the skeptical movement, advice from outsiders would have the opposite effect of what was intended.

Stephan Matthiesen's contribution I see as additive to those of Edgar Wunder and myself. It is another report on the German branch of the skeptic movement.

I have experienced people in the skeptic's organization who share my opinion that deviates from the general line and who have also expressed this in personal conversations and e-mails. When I was approached in a bullying manner in the association's internal public e-mail correspondence, I sometimes received approval from members, but this was only outside the distribution list and addressed directly to me.

Matthiesen has had similar experiences, namely that "certain activists did not agree with certain actions or persons setting the tone in private conversations, but then nodded it off in the corresponding meetings." He cites as a reason that these persons derived a certain benefit from the association with regard to their journalistic position.

This corresponds with my experience. I suspect that people I have seen as friends cover because they fear that they will no longer be referred by the association for lectures and public appearances on radio, television and in the print media. That explains a lot of the Executive Director's power of control.

Two other points raised by Stephan Matthiesen strike me:

1. the morality in dealing with the "victims" of the psi tests (Randi test);
2. the question of whether the skeptic movement would really be lacking in the event of its demise.

For scientific relevance, the psi tests lack power. I have pointed this out several times, most extensively in my *hoppla!* article "Psi research and skepticism" of July 9, 2019:

It is not so much a question of whether psi exists, nor whether one should continue to struggle to prove pro or con psi given the evidence. The psi test shows its value in educational work and in demonstrating scientific working methods.

Little attention was paid at the time to the question of morality. Matthiesen rightly draws attention to this. Although not designed to humiliate the candidates, the tests have the effect of exposing them. This is precisely where the tests get their traction with the public. It is basically the same dastardly mechanism to which programmes like “Deutschland sucht den Superstar” (“Pop Idol”) owe their widespread appeal. To be fair, it should be noted that the test directors always treat the candidates politely and with restraint. A comparison with Dieter Bohlen, the German host, is not appropriate.

Whether we would really miss the skeptic movement, I answer like this: The skeptic is not a pack animal. He does not need this movement. Besides, its purposes are well served elsewhere. On the other hand, people like to exchange ideas with like-minded people. A contact point with the goal of enlightenment in the sense of critical thinking is not fundamentally wrong.

Literature

Dawkins, R., Deschner, K., Schmidt-Salomon, M., & Wuketits, F.M. (2018). *Vom Virus des Glaubens*. Alibri.

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