

Editorial

Science, Faith, Faith in Science

GERHARD MAYER

Science and religion are considered incompatible, at least superficially. They concern different sectors of human existence and represent, in Cassirer's sense, different symbolic forms of understanding the world; it also means various forms of „shaping the world“ (Cassirer, 1944). In each case, one symbolic form can be the object of interest to the other. For example, religion as the object of scientific endeavor led to the discipline of „religious studies.“ Science has probably been observed throughout the history of organized religions by their officials with suspicious curiosity and also fought when it seemed necessary. The conflict between Galileo Galilei (1564–1641) and the Catholic Church, which resulted in an Inquisition trial and Galileo's conviction, is the most prominent example, to which many others could be added.¹ Such a conflict inevitably arises when religion is not understood in its function as *one* form, among many, of discerning the world, but when, in the form of a socially institutionalized church endowed with power, it considers itself as an absolute and unquestionable authority with world-descriptive sovereignty. The same applies to „science“. It often lays claim by cause of ultimate authority in matters of world and interpretation of reality when it does not confine itself to its function as one of several symbolic forms of capturing and shaping the world and acknowledges the limits of validity of its modeling.

The symbolic forms of understanding the world can be described analytically in their assorted ways of functioning, but they appear together in human beings and their actions. What may be considered incompatible at the theoretical level is empirically manifested in manifold mutual overlaps, mixtures and influencing relationships. Edgar Wunder brings an example of one of these aspects in his author's response to the comments on the skepticism articles. He characterizes

1 The conflict was not that Galileo was generally in opposition to the Catholic Church. He was and remained a devout Christian, and with his approach he wanted to adapt the worldview of the church to the new findings, regarding science and religion as separate spheres. In this he was not alone in the Catholic Church. The relationship between these two spheres was by no means a continuous, simple struggle. To quote historian of science Peter Harrison, “If there is a single word that might characterize past relationships it is ‘complexity’” (<https://www.theologie-naturwissenschaften.de/en/dialogue-between-theology-and-science/editorials/conflict-myth/>). (I thank Andreas Sommer for this reference).

the idea that there is “unbiased testing” and “assumption-free measurement” as naive empiricism further emphasizing scientific “observations are always already *theory-laden*, and social contexts provide for this ‘charge’, which cannot be ignored under any circumstances” (Wunder, 2021a: 159). There may be internal reasons for such theoretical “impregnation” in science along with external ones, i. e., influenced by other “sectors of human existence.” It is by no means consistently conscious to the actors. For the field of anomalistics, Michael Schetsche and I have pointed out the necessity of a reflexive approach to one’s own research activities in our essay “On Anomalistics Research – The Paradigm of Reflexive Anomalistics” (Mayer & Schetsche, 2016).

Organized Skepticism

The main topic of this issue of the *Journal of Anomalistics* (*JAnom*) deals with organized skepticism. Two former prominent members of the German skeptic organization *Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften e. V.* (GWUP), Edgar Wunder and Timm Grams, deal with the internal dynamics of this association and especially with the association’s political self-image together with the underlying ideological imprints and premises of the board of directors. The board is strongly oriented on the model of the American *Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal* (CSICOP, today CSI= *Committee for Skeptical Inquiry*). The two authors show that the name of the association with its reference to scientificity (“scientific investigation”) is a working euphemism, if not an outright lie, that dresses itself with the cloak of science² and represents “at its core a worldview community acting as a lobby group” (Wunder, 2021a: 158, in this issue).

A skeptical and self-critical attitude should generally be part of the basic equipment of every scientist, which gives rise to questioning whether beneficial skepticism turns into skepticism that impedes science affording knowledge a high degree of relevance. This is especially true for anomalistics since here a nonreflective and/or ideologically driven skepticism causes the greatest damage, as it was already the case with Galileo. The scientific striving for gaining knowledge was hindered out of ignorance or power-political calculation. From the perspective of the orthodox knowledge of the time and the prevailing cultural power, Galileo, as the representative of a new world view that deviated from the official and accepted doctrine, namely

2 The GWUP’s current website quotes James Randi (1928–2020), one of the best-known skeptics, writing of its longtime executive director and chairman Amardeo Sarma and the GWUP: “Since my good friend Amardeo Sarma and his hard-working team have gone out of their way to come to the aid of science, I have admired their dedication from afar” (<https://www.gwup.org/>, accessed 06/17/2021; author’s translation and emphasis). Curiously, this praise from a prominent face and, in addition, from their own camp, clearly locates GWUP’s position *outside* of science. “Science” will not be particularly happy about the unsolicited help from outside in most cases.

the Copernican, represented, so to speak, an “anomalistic” position; today, in Western-oriented cultures, religions no longer have the power to exert profound influence on science. Still, one can see in the *scientistic* belief in science, prevalent among “skeptics” and also quite a few scientists, a “new religion”³ bringing a similarly destructive and progress-impeding effect as religion in the prominent example of Galileo. This soon came to the attention of Edgar Wunder, sociologist and co-founder of the GWUP. While still active, he asked himself the question, “Who are the skeptics?” (Wunder, 1996). Then in 1998 he answered in his paper “The Skeptic Syndrome.” This interesting analysis has not been formally published in a journal and was previously only available online. Nevertheless, it has been found and cited. Last year saw the departure from the GWUP of former member Prof. Timm Grams, who contacted Wunder on the basis of his own experience. This exchange led to the idea to take another close look at the already more than 20 years old text “The Skeptic Syndrome”, to publish it together with a personal assessment of the author from a temporal distance and a report of Grams’ experience in the *JAnom*, for discussion. Due to the importance of the topic for anomalistics, the editors decided to translate the originally German texts into English and to publish both versions in this issue. They were sent to both decided “skeptics” and scientists working in the field of anomalistics for comments. Unfortunately, the former did not take the opportunity to counter the criticism presented. Accordingly, a stimulating discussion arose with the comments, which were also critical in some points, and the authors’ answers; unfortunately, the “skeptics’ side” refused to take part in this discussion.

Self-cleaning Power of Science

In such a precarious field of research as anomalistics, oftentimes denied its *raison d'être* from “skeptical” positions⁴, special attention must be paid to the observance of scientific standards. Exemplarity – precedence-setting toward a model standard in the field – and progressiveness define central guidelines of anomalistics. While the latter can be shown to be quite remarkable (Hövelmann, 2012), the former raises the question of what exemplarity refers to. However, exemplarity is also evident in how a community deals with its own values and internal problems. How does it react when a member violates the values and guidelines of scientific work? People often talk about the “self-cleaning power of science”. Unfortunately, due to modern times and changes in science as a whole, this often does not work very well (Bauer, 2017). It is precisely here that a community such as that of anomalistics can prove to be exemplary. Parapsychology has a good tradition in this, as the case of “Walter J. Levy Jr.” shows. Levy was an employee in the laboratory

3 See the article “Kulturkampf 2.0” by Harald Walach in this issue (Walach, 2021).

4 See, for example, Dean Radin’s reference to the critical essay by Reber & Alcock (2020) “Searching for the impossible: Parapsychology’s elusive quest” in his commentary “On Pathological Skepticism” in this issue (Radin, 2021).

of J. B. Rhine and was convicted of fraud by his colleagues. This embarrassing case for the institute was then disclosed by Rhine himself in the *Journal of Parapsychology* and led to a general discussion of the issue of fraud in parapsychology (Rhine, 1974b, 1974a, 1975; Roe, 2016).

Regrettably, a new, unpleasant case of scientific misconduct in the field of parapsychology has to be reported. It concerns the Argentinian psychologist and parapsychologist Alejandro Parra, who has systematically plagiarized texts in the last 15 years. It remained unchecked since much of it had initially appeared in Spanish translation. After more and more English-language articles were published it was only a matter of time before someone noticed the misfortune for him and parapsychology. In this case, it was IGPP scientist Michael Nahm, also a member of the Gesellschaft für Anomalistik [GfA = Society for Anomalistics]. Thanks to his profound knowledge of the existing literature, thorough research as well as tenacity, Nahm initiated a time-consuming, careful investigation of Parra's publications. These are not always easy activities of scholarship – one neither wants to lightly accuse a colleague of scientific mismanagement nor to damage the reputation of the community by publicly revealing internal misconduct.

Consequences of scientific mismanagement can harm the anomalistics community in several ways: by believing that such obvious and systematic plagiarism would not be noticed, he portrayed his colleagues as uncritical and stupid. To prevent further damage to the reputation of the Parapsychological Association, Parra's membership there was terminated.

Reusing case material from other researchers while labeling it as one's own collected data generally raises a distrust of collected data in the field of anomalistics. Importantly, this is particularly true of life-world accounts of anomalous experiences. The English version of a book about unusual near-death experiences (*The Last Farewell Embrace*), which consists almost exclusively of plagiarism from other, unnamed authors, was withdrawn from the market (Nahm, 2021: in press). The article based on a book chapter, "Experiences at the End of Life in Nursing Homes," published in *EdgeScience* (2018, #33, pp. 12–17), was retracted by the editors (*EdgeScience*, 2021, #45, p. 5), as was a 2017 article published in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* (Erickson, 2021: 137; see also Braude, 2021). An article by Parra was also published in the *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik (ZfA)* in 2019 (Parra, 2019). A thorough analysis was able to identify a plagiarized section of text here as well.⁵ It is the section "Nursing and Empathy" on pages 350–351, which is almost entirely taken from two third-party publications (Dal Santo et al., 2014; Smith, 2006), without citing them as references and marking the citations as such. Since the above-mentioned *EdgeScience* article demonstrably passed off interview data taken from other sources as self-collected, the question arises whether the data from the study on which the *ZfA* article is based can be trusted. For this reason, the editors of the *ZfA* retract the article.

5 The editors would like to thank Michael Nahm for this research.

Fraud in Parapsychology

We are confronted here with a problem that particularly affects parapsychology in two respects. The first, already mentioned, concerns the precarious situation of the entire discipline, whereby such misconduct by a single researcher can have strong repercussions on the evaluation of the entire discipline or of a field of research. We find an instructive example of this in the field of professional investigation of so-called “reincarnational cases,” founded in the early 1960s with Ian Stevenson (1918–2007) as the figurehead. Stevenson had to experience how, while writing a book about his field research, one of his translators was exposed as a fraud in the investigation of three Indian cases. He had faked his doctorate and apparently also invented cases that he had investigated. This resulted in the publisher stopping Stevenson’s book project and putting it on hold (cf. Shroder, 1999: 104). In this case, however, the fraud also had positive consequences, as is not so rare in parapsychology. Stevenson took the trouble to re-examine the three cases in question in order to verify the data collected. This resulted in the improved methodology of “replicating” such investigations, so to speak, which in this case means the multiple investigation of a case. This was subsequently applied more often.

In Stevenson’s case, it turned out that the data were valid despite the fraudulent Indian scientist involved as an interpreter. This is a case where you don’t have to dispose of the whole box of apples just because you found one rotten specimen in it. This leads to a second perspective on the problem of fraud in parapsychology. The questions “What is true, what is false?”, “What is valid, what is useless?”, and “Once you have uncovered a fraud, must you consider everything a fraud and invalidate the whole work or case?” are all too familiar to parapsychologists involved in RSPK cases and the study of mediumistic phenomena. Especially in scientifically investigated haunting cases, fraud seems to be part of the phenomenology for systemic reasons alone (Lucadou & Zahradnik, 2004). And, the “Bigfoot” fake by a fame-hungry cryptozoologist does not automatically devalue the whole “cryptozoology” subfield of anomalistics, just as fake UFO video clips on Youtube do not prove that there are no real recordings of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP). For insiders, these are of course “old hats” and are only mentioned here in distinction to the above-mentioned fraud on the part of the investigating scientist. Here a clear positioning must take place on the part of the community, because it is an indication of their self-purification forces. A member is to be excluded from the community if he or she consciously and significantly leaves the framework of scientific-ethical behavior.

In the case of the “skeptics,” on the other hand, there is the threat of expulsion if a member’s worldview deviates too much from the officially held opinion, as we can see from the articles by Wunder and Grams in this issue.⁶

6 Also groups from the field of anomalistics are not immune to the installation of such “faith tests”.

Necessary Innovations

Finally, I would like to point out changes in the *JAnom / ZfA* that affect its design, structure and organization. We are in a phase of upheaval that has not yet come to an end with this issue. It is visually recognizable by the changed cover design, in which the bilingualism is now also reflected in the title and the new ISSN number. Furthermore, it can be seen from the cover that from this issue on, *JAnom / ZfA* is officially published as a joint project of the Gesellschaft für Anomalistik and the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Psychohygiene (IGPP). With this step we are strengthening its profile and ensuring its publication, since the production is now distributed on several shoulders. In the future, the journal will be published in two issues per year, as it has been in the past; however, it will no longer be divided into a double issue and a single issue, but rather into two single issues of roughly equal size. We are converting it to “Platinum Open Access”, i. e. the texts will be made available free of charge in electronic form after publication. This step increases the attractiveness for authors, because Open Access texts are received and cited much more often. Together with the introduction of an English journal title and the larger proportion of English texts, we hope for increased international visibility and resonance, which of course also benefits the GfA as an association. However, the duplication of articles into German and English versions in this issue is an exception and due to the specific topic. Usually, only the editorial appears bilingually.

I wrote at the beginning of the last paragraph that the makeover phase is not complete. We are currently negotiating with a publisher about whether they will take over the printing and management of subscriptions. This would have several advantages and a few disadvantages, but I do not want to elaborate on them here. A decision will be made soon.

We live in interesting times when people have had to get used to some new situations. Not all of it is bad. Challenging confrontations can strengthen and advance, in the best sense, the interests of those who do not resist necessary innovations.

This can be seen from the report on the founding of the “International Coalition For Extraterrestrial Research” (ICER). In 2018, “internationally recognized UFO researchers” met at a conference and founded this association with the goal of extraterrestrial research, specifically to harmoniously coexist with cosmic intelligences and prepare for contact. The founding report states that all delegates had to swear an oath of allegiance: “The oath would state that each delegate believed that the UFO/UAP phenomenon was real and that we were dealing with an extraterrestrial/non-human intelligence.” And further: “This oath would be our bond and with it achieve something that had never been done in UFO historical terms i. e., a genuine worldwide international coalition of like-minded researchers.” (<https://icer.network/icer-origins/>)