

The Skeptics Syndrome¹

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Abstract – “Skeptics” and their organizations are self-proclaimed defenders of science against perceived pseudoscientific threats including all kinds of “paranormal” belief systems. In 1998 a paper called “The Skeptics Syndrome” was published by Edgar Wunder, analyzing structural problems in the German Skeptics organization GWUP from a sociological point of view. In conclusion, the paper argued the “skeptical” movement is integrated by a fixed ideological disbelief system, resulting in multiple biases when it comes to evaluate results or assumptions of parascience, frontier science or heterodoxies in science. Following a reprint of the “The Skeptics Syndrome” (1998) Edgar Wunder discusses what changes happened in the “skeptics” movement in the last 22 years and if the arguments put forward in 1998 still hold.

Keywords: critical thinking – disbelief system – new atheism – parapsychology – parascience – Paul Kurtz – pseudoscience – religion – scientism – skepticism – Skeptics movement – sociology of science

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- 1 Additional note for this print version 2020: The text „The Skeptics Syndrome“ was created in a first unpublished raw version in April 1998 due to systematically documented experiences inside the GWUP, which were gathered in the period from February 1997 to March 1998, when I was editor-in-chief of the GWUP magazine *Skeptiker*. In June 1998, I gave the first comprehensive presentation of the results and conclusions at a two-hour colloquium lecture at the Freiburg Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP). Directly after I left as an editor-in-chief of the *Skeptiker* in December 1998 the text was brought into the extended form presented here, shared within the GWUP and published on the Internet in February 1999. This version was also supplemented by an appendix written in January 1999, in which I described my personal biographical history in and with the „skeptical“ movement. This appendix is not included in the version presented here because I consider it to be insignificant. In 2002, a few selective additions were made to the text provided on the Internet, which are shown as footnotes in this printed version.
 - 2 **Edgar Wunder** was a founding member of both the GWUP and later the Gesellschaft für Anomalistik [Society for Anomalistics], as well as its long-time executive director. As a sociologist and geographer, he focuses on the spatial dynamics of the development of democratic institutions, civil society organizations, religions, and heterodox movements around science and politics. He is a lecturer at the University of Heidelberg and other universities and a research associate at the Social Science Institute of the EKD in Hanover. He is also the state chairman of Mehr Demokratie e.V. in Baden-Württemberg and a member of the district council and regional assembly of the Rhine-Neckar region. E-mail: edgar.wunder@urz.uni-heidelberg.de.

I am one of 19 founding members of the “Skeptical” organization “Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften e.V.“ (GWUP – Society for the Scientific Investigation of Parascience), founded in October 1987. I was their head of the section for the topic astrology from 1992 to December 1998, member of the executive committee of the GWUP from 1996 to July 1998, member of the editorial board of the GWUP-published magazine *Skeptiker* from 1994 to December 1998, and – last but not least – the responsible editor-in-chief of the *Skeptiker* from September 1996 to December 1998.

Against this background, I know the GWUP from the interior perspective very well as surely only very few others. According to the statutes of the association it is the self-declared goal of the GWUP to investigate “claimed paranormal phenomena without bias with scientific methods, as well as to promote such investigations and report on their results”, “to promote critical thinking”, to operate an appropriate “education of the public” and “to co-operate with like-minded persons, organizations and institutions”. According to the GWUP committee member Rainer Rosenzweig in an Editorial of the magazine *Skeptiker* (number 4/97), this means to take “a genuine neutral center”, i. e. “to make judgements, positive as well as negative, only after a careful examination, and then with the necessary circumspection.”

Praiseworthy goals, but my experiences with many members of the GWUP are unfortunately different. Within the GWUP there is a large number of members, who want to lead without sufficient specialized knowledge of the respective matter a kind of ideological fight against everything that they associate with the term “paranormal”. They accept also (consciously or unconsciously) a selective one-sided representation of the facts and arguments as well as occasionally also emotional-unobjective rhetorical tactics, while they are interested in scientific investigations in parasciences only to that extent as their results could supply “cannon fodder” for public campaigns.

As a conclusion of my experiences for many years in and with the GWUP, I would like to describe the symptomatic structural problems from which so-called “skeptical” organizations suffer almost incurably, in my opinion. I call this the “skeptics syndrome”.

Skeptics? – Terminological Problems and the Consequences

GWUP members usually call themselves “Skeptiker” [skeptics] and consider themselves part of a world-wide “skeptical movement”, which has taken up the cause of the “battle against the paranormal and pseudoscience” – so the world-wide leading American “skeptical” organization CSICOP³ in a press release to the “2. Welt-Skeptiker-Kongress” [world skeptics congress] in Heidelberg/Germany in July 1998. The problems start with the fact that there are (at least) two different

3 CSICOP = Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, founded in 1976. In 2006, CSICOP shortened its name to Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) (editor’s note).

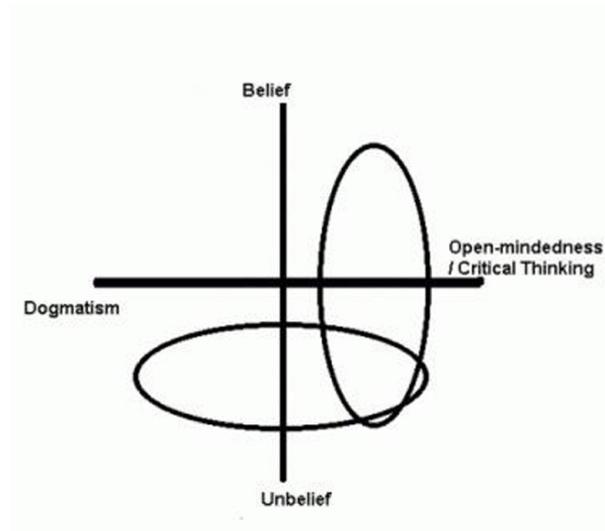


Fig. 1: The personality traits “dogmatism vs. openness” and “belief vs. unbelief” do not coincide, but represent two independent dimensions. In the axes of coordinates spanned by the two dimensions, individuals can be empirically located at any point. It is argued in the text that not the set represented right in the diagram, but the set represented in the bottom half of the diagram might represent the set of those individuals, who are members of the GWUP. This means that not “dogmatism”, but “unbelief” (concerning parasciences) is the commonality and thus the crucial criterion for GWUP membership.⁴

semantic dimensions associated with the term “skeptical”, which are repeatedly confused both by the public, but above all also within so-called “skeptical” organizations. The two dimensions are illustrated in figure 1: On the one hand there is the dimension “belief – unbelief” (e. g. regarding the “paranormal”, whatever that may be), on the other hand there is the dimension “dogmatism – open mindedness / critical thinking”. Here it has to be emphasized, that “unbelief” does not mean only “non-belief”, but the “unbelief”, understood as “disbelief”, is a belief-system itself.

A widespread and consequential short-sightedness in “skeptical” organizations consists in not noticing that these two dimensions are not identical, that “critical thinking” does not necessarily have to coincide with “unbelief”, just as “dogmatism” does not necessarily have to coincide with “belief”. In fact, empirically individuals can be found in all four quadrants of the

4 In the original text written in 1998, this graphic was not numbered. An explanation was only included in the main text. The following explanatory text was added later for this publication in the *Journal of Anomalistics* consistent with the statements in the main text.

graph. In the discourse among members of “skeptical” organizations, however, it is customary to use the term “skeptic” both in the meaning of “critically thinking people” and in the meaning of “persons who do not believe in the paranormal”; both are thus equated.

A survey of the readership of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, conducted by CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz in the spring of 1998, may serve to illustrate this: Five alternative answers were given to the question “Which of the following would you say best describes your point of view?” (the results of the survey were given in brackets): “Strong skeptic” (77.5%), “Mild skeptic” (16.2%), “Neutral” (2.4%), “Mild believer” (1.0%), “Strong believer” (0.4%). From this it can apparently be deduced that, firstly, for Kurtz the term “skeptic” means the opposite of “believer”, i.e. it stands for “unbelief” (or at least that Kurtz suspects such a category scheme in the minds of the readers of the *Skeptical Inquirer*), secondly, that for Kurtz the position of a “skeptic” is not “neutral”. Thirdly, that at least among CSICOP supporters, empirically only a vanishing minority considers itself “neutral”. If “skeptic” were to be understood in the context of this survey in the sense of “open mindedness / critical thinking”, terms such as “mildly skeptic” or “neutral” would be quite meaningless or difficult to understand. Obviously “skeptic” here means an “unbeliever” concerning the “paranormal”. Numerous other text passages from publications in the magazine *Skeptiker* could be cited in which the term “skeptic” is quite obviously used in this meaning.

On the other hand, there is, for example, the following understanding of the term, which “skeptical” organizations often cite in their public self-representations: “A skeptic in our understanding takes as little as possible for granted, but is willing to question and check every statement. In particular, he is also prepared to subject his own opinion to a critical examination. With this attitude skepticism stands in contrast to dogmatism. Skepticism does not mean blindly rejecting other opinions or even ‘denying’ the existence of paranormal phenomena from the outset.” This sentence is taken from the official GWUP image brochure and was written by me for the GWUP in 1996 – in a normative sense, as it should actually be in “skeptical” organizations, not necessarily as description of a real state.

The question is now, which of the two conceptual understandings describes the composition of the real existing “skeptical” movement. To put it differently: Does the “belief / unbelief” dimension form the demarcation line for the membership of those movements, or is it the “dogmatism / open mindedness-critical thinking” dimension? Related to the diagram: Which of the two sets shown in the figure corresponds to the real composition e.g. of the GWUP?

Since at least I do not know any member of the GWUP, who could be placed in the right upper quadrant, but a large number of members, who are to be classified undoubtedly into the left lower quadrant (and who partly internally do not even flinch from calling their own position even “ideological”!), no serious doubt can exist in my opinion that the real existing GWUP corresponds to the set represented in the diagram above.

This has consequences, for it means that the group's cohesion is at risk and it is threatened by disintegration in case that a serious, open-ended, equal and collegial discussion is to take place with persons in the upper right sector, because the persons in the lower left quadrant then fear an "abandonment of the skeptical (unbelieved) profile" or even a questioning of the group identity. The same can happen when group members in the lower right sector openly criticize persons in the lower left sector and/or emphasize that certain results of empirical studies seem to contradict the "unbelief" belief system and therefore call for a serious, open, informed scientific debate.

The results are considerable tensions and conflicts in the group, which must inevitably occupy the executive committee of such an association, since it is not difficult to see that any kind of questioning or even shifting of the group borders in the diagram could lead to serious upheaval, even waves of resignation. The Executive Committee will therefore essentially try to maintain the status quo of the group in the graph and threaten those who, in its view, might jeopardize this status quo with sanctions and, if necessary, use force to take appropriate measures and "clean up". In this respect, what took place within the GWUP in 1998 is virtually a textbook example of such dynamics.

The Skeptics Syndrome as an Ideal Type

In order to understand why a threat potential is quickly seen here that threatens the stability of the group as a whole, it is necessary to list some typical characteristics that particularly characterize the persons in the lower left quadrant of the graph. It is an *ideal type*, which I call the "skeptics syndrome". I do not say that affected persons must exhibit *all* listed characteristics of the syndrome without exception. Furthermore, I certainly do not say that all members of the GWUP show this syndrome. I state however that within the GWUP persons, who exhibit different characteristics of this syndrome as indicators, dominate to an extent that the GWUP is affected on the whole, both as organization and in its actions very substantially by it.⁵ What are the typical characteristics of this syndrome?

5 This paragraph was revised in 2002 as follows: "It is an ideal-typical polythetic set, which I call the 'skeptics syndrome'. This means that the syndrome has to be considered as given with respect to a concrete individual already if some of the following characteristics are fulfilled (not all of them have to apply in every single case). At the same time, it is an emergent phenomenon, i.e. something new is created when many of the characteristics come together in their specific combination and inner relation: the mentality of the ideal-typical "skeptical" as a socio-cultural reality, which, especially in social communalization (in a "community of opinion"), is constantly being created, affirmed and stabilized anew. In this respect, we are dealing primarily with a social phenomenon, not just with the attitudes of isolated individuals. The "skeptical" movement is the social place where this specific set of mental patterns is handed down and reproduced.

Those “skeptics” see the primary or even the only goal of the group in lobbying and public relations work with the aim of pushing back certain “paranormal” ideas in the population or “putting a stop to” the active representatives of such beliefs. In this respect it is about mission and advocacy, where carrying out own scientific investigations is regarded as relatively superfluous, since it is already clear “that everything is nonsense”. (Since the knowledge of relevant facts and scientific studies on the respective topic is usually not too great among those persons, “public relations” in terms of content is often limited to popularizing the name of one’s own organization in connection with mere opinions or with other borrowed facts). One’s own group is not understood as a “scientific (research) community” but as a social movement, as a “sworn community (of conviction)” with ultimately political goals, namely to help one’s own idea of “rationalism” achieve a breakthrough in the entire society. Political parties, not scientific societies, should be held up as role models in terms of procedure and other issues. Within the framework of such a view, one’s own group finds itself in a constant struggle situation in which internal differences of opinion are only perceived as obstacles and unity is expected, at least externally. Corresponding pressure to conform is exerted in the “ingroup”.

A group that sees itself in such a combat situation naturally has little interest in democratic votes and procedures within its own ranks, since, similar to an army, they are perceived only as a hindrance and counterproductive for the actual goal, i. e., closed external action. As registered association, the GWUP is formally structured democratically (in contrast to the American CSI-COP), but the reality is that, for example, according to one GWUP committee member, membership meetings are only to be used, “to draw strength together” and strengthen the “feeling of togetherness” in harmony. Controversial discussions, debates or even votes are considered contrary to this purpose and therefore to be prevented if possible. Thus, in my recollection, in the entire twelve-year history of the GWUP, there have never been two competing candidates for an executive committee position, and the respective persons have always been proposed by the committee itself. Real practiced association democracy is, a GWUP executive committee member once said to me, “unnecessary luxury”, which one can do without confidently, since the tasks of the GWUP are different.

People who are subject to the skeptics syndrome can be recognized not least by the frequent use of the word “we” (instead of “I”): The point is always that “we” must compete against “them” and stick together; and if “we” had a controversial discussion among ourselves, “they” would only laugh up their sleeve, etc. (ingroup-outgroup polarization). Therefore, controversies within the group must be ended as quickly as possible. While attack and criticism are emphasized externally, an already dysfunctional conflict avoidance strategy prevails internally almost at all costs, at least as far as the leadership bodies are concerned. “Outgroup” positions, on the other hand, should under no circumstances be given a forum, neither in publications nor at conferences, because this would be “advertising” for the opponent, who

would already have “enough opportunities”; one should not “further enhance” them in this way.

It needs no further emphasis that groupthink symptoms thrive under such conditions. I experienced GWUP committee meetings, in which all participants assured each other that a certain study is “nonsense” and “disproved”, without even one single participant having read that study, or being able to give relevant arguments or a “refutation”.

Even discovered, sometimes embarrassing, provable mistakes and false assertions by individual members are hardly ever criticized within the organization (and certainly not publicly!), but are tolerated as long as they do not contradict the organization’s own convictions with regard to their goals. “The main thing is being against it!” seems to be the motto for many. Thus, it was possible for example that an earlier GWUP member violently attacked Gauquelin’s thesis of a “Mars effect” for years with provably wrong arguments. Even when this person (for other reasons) was no longer a GWUP member, no one but me felt compelled to a critical reappraisal. In many other examples, members have told me in private that they considered this or that assertion of other members to be demonstrably false, but did not want to openly criticize them “in order not to harm the skeptical movement”.

Perceived danger and threat potentials play a major role for those “skeptics” and their motivation. “Defending the rational world from a rising tide of nonsense” (Paul Kurtz) is a vital task for the future existence of society and humanity, which requires all efforts. In this context, the social significance and the possibilities of influence of their own group, i. e. the “skeptical” organization, are also excessively overestimated by many members. They see themselves as a unique and indispensable elite, on whose actions the further development of society depends to a large extent.

This is accompanied by a repeatedly expressed strong emotional-personal consternation (“I felt hot and cold running down my spine”), when those “skeptics” are confronted with various “esoteric” ideas and practices, e. g. in their acquaintance. It is a large emotional satisfaction to be “among themselves” at least once a year as participants of a GWUP conference and to be able to encourage each other away from a world plagued by irrationalism – why controversial discussions with “non-skeptics” on such a conference are felt as “disturbing” and rejected strictly. In this context, the joint “being indignant at ...” is apparently also perceived as particularly community-building.

In general, it only makes sense to deal with such parascientific ideas that pose a serious danger to humans and society; everything else is irrelevant. Only in the rarest cases is the “danger” (or more precisely: the opportunity-risk ratio) substantiated on the basis of empirical studies or assessments, but rather individual cases (whose representativeness is questionable), subjective

experiences, horror scenarios and feelings of being affected are used as arguments – in principle only as a mirror image of so-called “esotericists”, who want to convince us of the salutary benefit of their respective systems with similar arguments. If one asks those “skeptics” why they deal with such topics at all, one does not get the answer because they find this or that question interesting, but dangerous threats are imagined, why one must fight against certain ideas. Otherwise, however, those “skeptics” are only interested in whether a certain assertion is “true” or not. If it is not true – and one believes to know this anyway –, it is often hastily classified as “dangerous”. For the reference to “dangerousness” is needed to ultimately justify political action in which they are primarily interested.

The fact that the questions about the truth content and the opportunity/risk ratio are relatively independent of each other and cannot simply be reduced to each other is hardly seen, just as little that questions about the psychology and sociology of such “paranormal” belief systems would be of central interest and worthy of empirical investigation. In any case this is not regarded as an issue for the GWUP. This ignorance and one-sided fixation on the question about the truth content is obviously also naive, since without clarifying the psychosocial background any “educational work” can probably not be carried out effectively. In any case, however, these people hardly start out from (for them open) questions, but rather from (for them fixed) answers.

The followers of “paranormal” beliefs – or those who think differently in general – are pathologized. They are accused of a lack of cognitive abilities (“nutcases,” “fools,” “insane,” etc.) or criminal intentions (“impostors,” “charlatans,” etc.). This is often accompanied by a willingness to repress, calls for the courts, for state intervention, for aggressive campaigns, e.g. to ensure that certain people are no longer invited to adult education centers, for example, etc. It is also noticeable that many such “skeptics” are outwardly, publicly, rather cautious with such pathologizations of their “opponents”, since they have recognized that this can be counterproductive; within the group, however, they do not mince their words (“internally one must be allowed to say this openly”), which shows that their public statements have a tactical character, but do not correspond to their actual convictions.

It is a characteristic of prejudiced persons that they believe in the inherent inferiority of a certain group or that people are judged negatively just because they belong to a group. It was striking for me how fast a considerable number of GWUP members already make (sometimes drastic!) judgements about people (whom they otherwise don't know) or even about their work (which they know even less) as soon as their affiliation with a certain group became known, or as soon as another GWUP member put a “label” on the person (particularly popular is: “esoteric”).

The terms chosen in the discourse are also typical for those “skeptics”: from the outset, they range from judgmental to defamatory terms (e.g. “superstition”, “humbug”, “pseudoscience”,

“charlatans”, “sects”, “Psi exponents” – as a term for parapsychologists – and so on), not largely descriptive-analytical terms (e.g. “parascience”, “anomalies”, “extraordinary human experiences” and so on). Furthermore, the attribution of the term “paranormal” to certain alleged phenomena often already has a defamatory character, since the term is negatively connoted for those persons and is sometimes used almost synonymously with “silly”. Typically, such “skeptics” equate the term “parascience”, if used, with the term “pseudoscience” and do not differentiate further here.

This is accompanied by a lack of willingness to differentiate between different parascientific disciplines: Often everything is lumped together and undifferentiatedly spoken of as a “belief in the paranormal” (which has to be fought), as if we were dealing with a somehow uniform system of belief – a notion that has long been empirically refuted. Likewise, insufficient differentiation is made in the perception of the social conflict field around parascience: Stereotype thinking prevails, with a frequent division into “wolves” (=“para-representatives”), “sheep” (= the population to be “protected”) and “guardians” (=the organized “skeptics”). Anyone who questions such simplistic stereotypes and calls for a “cross-camp” dialogue is accused of “sitting on the fence”, of being only partly trustworthy, or at least “naive”.

The demonizations of the “other side” also go hand in hand with the willingness to generalize very quickly from a single person to e.g. “all parapsychologists”. This is not surprising, since in social psychology it is a typical feature of dogmatic thinking or of “closed-mindedness” that perceptions, ideas and judgements concerning positively valued objects are much more precise and complex than those concerning negatively valued objects.

Those “skeptics” have hardly – usually no – personal friendly contacts with leading “parascientists” or “esoterics”, which would be theoretically possible without further ado despite differences of opinion as regards content, and would even be obvious if a fair open dialogue were sought. Such “skeptics” have no interest in such contacts, they do not take part in any events of the “other camp” (apart from visiting some local esotericism fair as a curiosity), since they do not expect to gain any information, but at most to be annoyed by “all the nonsense”.

At the same time, these “skeptics” do not read publications from the parascientific field (e.g. *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, *Journal of Scientific Exploration*), or from the esoteric field (e.g. *Esotera*, *Magazin 2000*). According to a survey among skeptics that I conducted in 1997, approx. 90% of the GWUP members read not a single journal of this kind. Accordingly, they are poorly informed, both about current developments in the “esoteric scene”, and – and this is more significant – about various investigations (or the state of discussion in general), as they are repeatedly published e.g. in the mentioned “parascientific” journals.

The regular source of information on parasciences for most GWUP members is instead the general daily and weekly press as well as popular science magazines – in addition to their own publication *Skeptiker* and other “skeptical” literature –, according to the survey mentioned above. (Although scientific journals of their respective disciplines – e.g. chemistry, biology, physics, etc. – are also read, these are known, however, to contain hardly any articles on parascientific topics). This applies, according to my experience, also to the overwhelming majority of persons with leading positions within the GWUP, e.g. to members of the executive committee or the science council of the GWUP. (However, the so-called GWUP “science council” basically exists only on paper anyway and is quasi inactive, instead it serves only as an academic “figurehead”).

Consequently, there is usually a lack of basic factual knowledge about what is actually claimed by parascientists and what is not. Instead, the judgments refer to various partly misleading stereotypes that are common in the media. According to my experiences, a considerable part of the GWUP members has e.g. no idea, what the difference between “zodiac signs” and “constellations” is, what the expression “encounter of the third kind” means correctly or which different “parapsychological” institutions exist in Germany and/or how they are institutionalized (in the *Skeptisches Jahrbuch 1998* [skeptical yearbook 1998], published by the GWUP member Lee Traynor, for example, there is talk about an “Ernst (sic!) Bender” as the founder of a “parapsychological institute”, “which today bears the name Institut für Psychohygiene”) – which does not prevent many from expressing themselves loudly about astrology, ufology, parapsychology or other topics, to a large extent with accordingly unqualified announcements.

In this context, the frequent blanket invocation of well-known “debunkers” (especially James Randi and his \$1 million challenge) as authorities and role models, instead of presenting concrete arguments, can be understood. In general, it is popular to declare that one “bets” that this and that effect will turn out to be an artifact (in an indefinite time!). This makes it possible to demonstrate a high degree of subjective certainty without having to deal with the matter in detail. Usually, own investigation activity into parasciences does not occur at all, because it is already clear that everything is “nonsense”; why should one still examine? If “investigations” are carried out at all, then only in order to demonstrate to a broad public what is already considered to be certain (the term “demonstrations” would therefore be more appropriate), but not to track down questions that are still considered open and where a serious need for research is seen. Since the financial means are limited, in the latter case a competitive relationship would develop to the public relations work, which, without any doubt, enjoy the absolute primacy within the GWUP. Since there is nothing more to be seriously investigated within the parasciences, corresponding investigations are a waste of time and money; the funds should better be used to intensify public relations work. If I am convinced that a certain effect does not exist, why should I spend a lot of time and money to investigate this alleged

effect? I would rather convince the public of my opinion. But this is not a science, it is ultimately a religious-missionary attitude.

A member of the science council (!) of the GWUP (today director of the GWUP office) said on my suggestion to invite external speakers to GWUP conferences to present newer empirical investigations (externally, since there are hardly any such speakers internally at the GWUP) that empirical investigations are boring anyway, that it is “always the same”; what should one expect to find that is new? He does not think much of such presentations. If anything is investigated at all, it is cases that are relatively easy to invalidate and already very questionable (e.g. obvious charlatanism in the field of esotericism), while the “tougher nuts” (e.g. various parapsychological laboratory experiments) are avoided. It would be appropriate for a scientific attitude to turn critically to the best arguments of the (so felt) “opposite side”, not as a substitute to the weakest ones.

If someone in the “other camp” does scientific research on parascience, this is perceived as a nuisance, which one would like to prevent if one could, provided that the researcher concerned receives public funds to finance his study. There is no positive attitude to spend money on scientific studies of parascience. If one considers that this applies to a very substantial part of the membership of the GWUP, the name “Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften” [“Society for the scientific investigation of parasciences”] can really only be understood as fraudulent labeling.

One wonders what the function of the group is at all for many members of the GWUP. As editor-in-chief of the *Skeptiker*, I received numerous statements and inquiries from GWUP members along the following lines: “I know anyway that parasciences are nonsense. Therefore I need the GWUP primarily in order to be able to justify well, why it is nonsense.” However, this does not meet a scientific attitude. Many members of the GWUP are obviously interested in gaining social support in the group for their already firmly held convictions and prejudices, in having them socially confirmed by a group that is perceived as authoritative, and in receiving argumentation aids for corresponding discussions in their own social environment.

Another characteristic of the skeptics syndrome seems to be a special presentation, even pride, of the term “skeptic”. Such persons often answer the question “Who are the skeptics?” in short with “We are” – thus introducing a third meaning of the term “skeptic” by simply using it as a term for the “ingroup”.

One has to realize exactly what ultimately happens is that the three meanings of “skeptic” are equated without reflection: “critically thinking people” = “people who don’t believe in the paranormal” = “ingroup”. The members of their own group (“skeptics”) are thereby not only secretly declared by definition to be critically thinking people (“skeptics”), but also their substantive

position (“skeptics” as “unbelievers”) is determined. If criticism of “skeptics” (ingroup) is voiced from outside, the response is that “skeptics” means “in reality” nothing more than “critically thinking people” and in this respect the criticism of the “skeptics” (now again “ingroup”) is unjustified. Conversely, someone can quickly be declared an “outgroup” (“non-skeptic”) by assuming “belief in the paranormal” (= “non-skeptic”), without the need for an examination of the remaining “skeptical” dimension of critical thinking. Sensitized to the different meanings of the term “skeptical” I experienced such argumentation patterns that were surreptitiously obtained by context changes so frequently in the GWUP that I plan for the future a comprehensive analysis of texts of prominent representatives of “skeptical” organizations in detail in order to point out how those persons use the term “skeptical” depending on context in a different way and how this affects their conclusions. By the way, I have no doubt that this is done without reflection. I do not see an a priori reason of any kind for the assumption that “skeptics” in the first sense are automatically “skeptics” in the second sense (or vice versa) or even inevitably identical with “skeptics” in the third sense, but rather numerous proofs that this is not the case.

The demarcation of the subject areas in which the GWUP should be active is a topic for itself. “Syndrome skeptics” tend to stretch the boundaries very far, including issues of religion and worldview. This is only consistent if one understands acting against parascience as a worldview struggle, as those “skeptics” often do. Then it is no longer necessary to consider which questions are actually still accessible to an empirical-scientific approach and which are not. In extreme cases, this struggle can even refer to “everything bad in the world”.

While some self-declared “skeptics” openly demand that the GWUP should clearly and combatively take up position on issues of religion and worldview as well, others recognize that this would be at least tactically unwise, as it would jeopardize the reliability of the organization and likely lead to group-internal tensions (because the GWUP is not completely homogeneous in terms of worldview, although atheistic-naturalistic-scientific positions clearly dominate). Consequently, for tactical (!) reasons, dealing with questions of religion and belief is avoided and a “labor division” with other organizations (usually organized atheists) is sought or recommended. The executive director of the GWUP represents e.g. such an attitude, and so does the CSICOP chairman Paul Kurtz.

The possibility or probability that one of the phenomena rejected as “paranormal” could prove to exist at some point in time is – if this question is asked seriously at all – regarded as approaching zero, negligibly small or as purely hypothetical beyond all serious considerations. Since it became clear to many members of the GWUP from various public controversies that by showing too clearly those subjective quasi-absolute certainties one would appear in a dogmatic light, such “skeptics” often got into the habit of always emphasizing their “fundamental openness” in the sense of a rhetoric, but hardly follow this through with serious considerations. A

typical example is, for instance, an answer of the GWUP executive director Amardeo Sarma published in the newsletter *GWUP-Aktuell* 1/98 to the question whether he considers it possible that theses which are currently classified as “paranormal” could prove to be true: “With an appropriate state of affairs I would be willing ... to participate in such a fundamental paradigm shift. That this situation would occur would surprise me more than to learn that Karl Marx never lived and is an invention of Thomas Gottschalk”.⁶ The last sentence underlines on the one hand Sarma’s absolute certainty, on the other hand it fulfills the function to ridicule corresponding theses.

The more certain we are in our judgement, the more difficult it is for us to judge new data fairly. And this is precisely the problem of those “skeptics”. In addition, they are largely unfamiliar with the relevant literature, which is why, given an appropriate “state of affairs”, they would certainly be among the last to recognize and implement such a “paradigm shift”, certainly only significantly after the general scientific community itself. However, this is a questionable situation for a society for the “scientific investigation of parascience”, from which one should actually expect that its heart beats very close to the respective current research and knowledge horizon and that it also plays a pioneering role in communicating this to both the scientific community and the public. One of the GWUP committee members admitted to me in a personal discussion completely openly that this is not the case due to missing knowledge – and he defended it with the argument that it was not at all the task of the GWUP to inform about the current state of research –, but only about the conditions under which one could accept such a “paradigm change” if necessary. It is questionable to what extent people who have little connection with the respective research process and its specific problems are particularly qualified for such meta-judgements.

The question to which extent a typical “skeptical” organization would be capable of taking in findings contradicting their “unbelief” system – apart from the lack of or at best very selective flow of relevant information in those organizations and the largely lacking controversial discussion culture at the scientific level – also raises doubts in other respects: Because for quite a number of those “skeptics” the end justifies the means to a certain extent with regard to their “fight against the paranormal”. Repeatedly, various GWUP members assured me that they regard also unobjective arguments (referring to emotions, cynicism etc.) as legitimate, in order to fight against the “paranormal”. This can go as far as deliberately concealing possibly “disturbing” information.

On the occasion of a conference planned by the GWUP, to which, at the suggestion of Rudolf Henke and myself, “pro”-representatives (usual terminus technicus in the GWUP, which by the

6 Thomas Gottschalk (* 1950) is a German TV entertainer (translator’s note).

way already implies that the GWUP is always “contra”) should also be invited as speakers in order to lead an unbiased and constructive dialogue, the executive director of the GWUP, Amardeo Sarma, for example, said to me that it would be better not to invite a particular speaker, since the presented study (which Sarma did not know at that time at all!) could possibly appear so good and so flawless that the “skeptics” of the GWUP could not think of any more arguments against it. In the same way, Sarma demanded that pro-contra-dialogues in the *Skeptiker* (which had been introduced by me and were seen by him and other GWUP members with large distrust, since they would endanger “the skeptical profile”) must be put on from the outset in such a way that the “skeptical side” has the whip hand, the conclusion word and end up as the winner.

Thus, Sarma told me in an e-mail: “Controversial discussions are allowed if and only if it is in the interest of the skeptical reader or serves to convince readers who are not yet skeptical. In any case, it must be ensured that ... a conclusion must always be drawn from a skeptical perspective. It should be prevented, even in each individual case, that doubts about the skeptic’s position arise”. In which sense “skeptical” is meant here does not need to be further emphasized and is also clearly shown by the context of the mentioned intention “convince” (of course with regard to the content positions). For Sarma the target group for the magazine *Skeptiker* is exclusively “the skeptically adjusted person in the sense of the GWUP and/or people we believe we can convince appropriately”. According to Sarma, the target group definitely did not include people “who are unlikely to switch to the ‘skeptical camp’”. To such persons “no concessions” should be made, “which means specifically that we must not leave statements of e.g. parapsychologists unchallenged”. The readers must not “be confused about the objective of the magazine”; always and in each individual case it is to be considered “that the reader is not left in ambiguity about the position in the sense of the GWUP” etc. Moreover, one should not fall for the “myth of the responsible reader”, according to another committee member. The editors must therefore always ensure that only the “correct” opinions and information “in the sense of the GWUP” appear in the journal, or if divergent opinions appeared at all, then they must be commented in a specified manner.

One might wonder whether behind such a view there is not considerable distrust of the “self-cleaning” process of science, as well as a remarkable disdain for one’s own readership in terms of their critical thinking ability. Such an attitude could also be called *cui-bono* thinking, which is another typical component of the skeptics syndrome: The decision criterion for one’s own actions is ultimately always the question “Who benefits from it?”. What is not accepted is the standard that is appropriate from a scientific perspective that, e.g. at conferences or in publications, simply the person who has something relevant to say and can defend his or her position in a critical discourse with factual, well-founded arguments will have his or her say – and not the person who has the “right” opinion, comes to the “right” results or belongs to the “right” group.

In public announcements, however, those “skeptics” present themselves quite differently. For example, Sarma writes in an article in the *Skeptiker* 4/96: “The audience is able to form an opinion; therefore, one should let the facts speak for itself ... The goal of the GWUP is it not to be get right or win the case but together to get as closely to the truth as possible.” The discrepancy to the above mentioned internally represented positions of Sarma is obvious. Although cui-bono thinking is a central feature of the syndrome, it is one that, for good reasons, only emerges openly in internal communication with presumed “like-minded people”.

However, Sarma certainly was not wrong with such and similar internally made demands on me, at least from a functional perspective; because if anything else applied, in my estimation the GWUP would indeed be facing a crucial test, because the majority of the members would then see the “profile” and “identity” of the GWUP fundamentally threatened. As a last consequence, the “skeptical” organizations would disintegrate, because they live on this “communicative closure,” without which their ideologemes would crumble as much as their social base. And for those who set priorities differently and, in case of doubt, prefer scientific seriousness to the groups’ needs for self-affirmation, self-preservation and ideological positioning the following applies (according to Sarma in September 2002 in Prague at an international coordination meeting of “skeptic” functionaries): “It is fine to have such persons outside a skeptical organization and they sometimes correctly point out flawed reasoning amongst skeptics. It is within a skeptical group that they pose a real danger, because this position undermines the identification of skeptics with their skeptical group.” I can only agree with this.⁷

⁷ The preceding paragraph represents the 2002 slightly modified and supplemented version.