

The Skeptical Quagmire

Personally I prefer to consider the word of the scientific man who is sacrificing his time, his health and his reputation in the effort to solve a persistent mystery, than the snap judgment of a professional conjurer.

— Hamlin Garland

I've never been comfortable knowing only one side of a story. I insist that my beliefs about an afterlife be based on the best evidence and take into account all the evidence and all the reasonable arguments both for and against that belief. That is why the concept for my book, *The Survival Files*, always included a section in which I would present the other side of the issues as objectively and clearly as I could. In pursuit of that goal, I sought the views of the skeptical, the unbeliever, and the agnostic. Much to my dismay, I have found very little worth quoting.

To be sure, there are a few deceitful people ready to relieve you of your purse by faking contact with the spirit world. Some of these villains are so adept at snooping and cold-reading and sleight-of-hand (and foot) that they can fool many of the people much of the time. Thus, in this treacherous world, it is wise to be skeptical. But there are significant differences between being skeptical and being a "professional skeptic" or what I have come to call an "überskeptic" (a term I define as an outspoken proponent of skepticism whose livelihood, power base, and/or social status depends on bolstering the illusion that all psychic phenomena are bogus).

Being skeptical means being aware of the possibility of fraud and coincidence; being an

überskeptic means automatically rejecting all possibilities except fraud and coincidence. Being skeptical means remaining open to all possibilities until one is proven to be correct; being an überskeptic means being closed to any psychic explanation, no matter how strong the evidence or how preposterous the other possibilities. Most critically, being skeptical means giving all sides of an issue a fair hearing; being an überskeptic apparently imparts a willingness to mislead others as to the existence and nature of psychic phenomena.

There are a plethora of überskeptics in this world. Many are philosophers, some are scientists, and a surprising number are magicians (or, at least, amateur magicians). Several are such skilled communicators that their influence is widespread. It is very likely that readers of this document have been influenced by the works of these professional naysayers, and so I feel I have a duty to expose their devious methods.

The approach most often and enthusiastically followed to obscure evidence for Survival is to attack the character of either the witness or the researchers who present such claims. Of course, if a witness has been known to fabricate experiences or the researcher known to falsify data, then it is legitimate to take such

dishonesties into consideration when evaluating their claims. Even when there is no hint of past or present fraud, however, überskeptics often resort to besmirching the people involved. The stronger and more convincing the evidence, the more the skeptics try to focus attention on irrelevancies such as personality.

Although popular with some in the media — because it makes a good story — I find such name-calling to be divisive and detrimental to the process of understanding and communicating the truth about heaven. Therefore, I shall refrain from using the names of those super skeptical philosophers, scientists, and magicians here. The reader needs to be on the look-out for the tactics I describe herein no matter from whom they originate. And the entrenched überskeptics will know who I am talking about anyway.

Ad Hominem

Since we have already described the focus-on-the-person-not-the-facts approach, I'll start with a few actual examples.

A classic instance of what I call The MacLaine Maneuver (named in honor of dear Shirley, who has been the subject of more skeptics' attempts at humor than any other person) is provided by a long-time critic of the idea of reincarnation. This maneuver involves belittling an idea by poking fun at its proponents. A common way to do that is to suggest that Shirley MacLaine has been in some way associated with them. In attempting to denigrate the past-life regressionist, Dr. Helen Wambach, this critic refers to her as “a star of the tabloids and one of the ‘authorities’ to whom Shirley MacLaine appeals for a scientific underpinning of her investigation.”

Dr. Wambach has done considerable research on people who, under hypnosis, seem to remember past lives. This is similar to the work of the Drs. Goldberg, Netherton, Newton, and many other regression therapists. What really draws this critic's scorn, however, is Wambach's and Goldberg's experiments with progressive hypnosis. He begins his commentary with: “In recent years, past-life regressionists have extended their activities to explorations of future lives.” (In fact, the only thing recent is his awareness of the subject; hypnotic progressions have been going on at least since 1910.) He then lampoons the idea, calling Dr. Goldberg a “comedian” of “stupendous talent” and making the MacLaine reference to Dr. Wambach. All this without the slightest mention of any of the mountains of evidence that Goldberg and Wambach have compiled.

Another popular way to imply that people are whackos is to put their name in the same sentence as a reference to UFOs. For instance, when a critic wished to call Dr. Gary Schwartz' character into question — without, of course, risking a libel suit — he wrote: “It might be a warning sign to us that Schwartz was educated at Harvard, which also gave us Dr. John Mack, the man who apparently has never met anyone who hasn't been abducted by space aliens.” (The fact that several other überskeptics have also attended Harvard is, naturally, not mentioned.)

Or, observe the not-so-subtle linking in the following comment by another überskeptic: “Unless carefully controlled studies and standards are applied, people can deceive themselves and others into believing that almost anything is true and real — from past-life regression and extraterrestrial abductions to

satanic infestations and near-death experiences." Apparently, the writer hopes that his readers will be so alienated by aliens or distracted by the devil that they will forget about those cases that *have* been subject to careful controls.

Guilt by Association

Here is a quote from a popular skeptical magazine. The author's statements are technically true — his implications are not.

"The Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882. ... These researchers examined reports of apparitions and ghostly hauntings. ... Many famous mediums such as Eusapia Palladino (in Italy) and Leonora Piper (in Boston) were tested under controlled conditions in an effort to determine whether they possessed extraordinary powers.

"Palladino was **especially** elusive, and the scientific community was split as to whether **she** was fraudulent. ... Palladino was also tested in the United States at Harvard by Hugo Muensterberg (1909) and at Columbia University (1910) by a team of scientists; and in both cases the physical levitation of the table behind her and the feeling of being pinched by her spirit control (called John King) was found to be caused by her adroit ability to stretch her leg in contortions and to pinch sitters with her toes, or levitate a small table behind her. This was detected by having a man dressed in black crawl under the table and see her at work." [Emphasis added.]

The final sentence of the first paragraph quoted is correct — both Palladino and Piper were famous and they were both tested. The next paragraph, detailing some of the tests that Palladino failed, is also accurate — some legit-

imate questions were raised concerning Palladino's physical effects. But — and this is a huge BUT — Leonora Piper was never, ever accused of cheating by any of those who studied her first hand. As detailed in numerous books and articles, Piper was scrutinized, examined, and analyzed by the most hard-nosed skeptics and the most experienced investigators for decade after decade. One of these skeptical investigators, Professor Richard Hodgson, of Cambridge University, had been a key player in "exposing" Eusapia Palladino and had announced his intention to do likewise to Piper. Not only did he find absolutely no evidence of fraud, but, after 10 years of careful study,¹ Hodgson publicly admitted that he had been wrong and that, in his own words, "I have no hesitation in affirming with the most absolute assurance that the 'spirit' hypothesis is justified by its fruits."² He was joined in his endorsement of an afterlife by two other highly respected skeptics who investigated Piper, Professor James Hyslop of Columbia and Professor William James of Harvard.

The material quoted above demonstrates a favored technique that scientism's true believers use to deal with evidence that contradicts their creed — *i.e.*, guilt by association. Since the article's author could say nothing directly against Piper, he introduces her in the same breath as Palladino, hoping that his readers will absorb the unstated but implied idea that both have been discredited. He even says that Palladino "was especially elusive, and the scientific community was split as to whether she was fraudulent," thereby encouraging his readers to infer that, in contrast, Piper was easily exposed and scientists were unanimous in

their claims of fraud. (Also, he talks about Paladino pulling tricks in dark rooms, but he fails to mention that Piper worked in rooms that were fully illuminated.)

But the author is not done making unwarranted associations:

“Late in his career the famous magician Houdini (1874-1926) exposed several bogus mediums. By the 1920s **the spiritualist movement was thoroughly discredited**, because **when the controls were tightened, the effect disappeared.**” [Emphasis added.]

In truth, the Spiritualist movement was not discredited during the 1920s; two of the world’s best known mediums, Briton Eileen Garrett and American Arthur Ford, were at the height of their careers during the 1930s. Thus, we have here, at best, an opinion stated as a fact. Placing such an opinion immediately after the true (but irrelevant) statement about Houdini, is clearly an attempt to get the reader to falsely assume that Houdini was largely responsible for the exposure of mediums. The final phrase, though — “when the controls were tightened, the effect disappeared” — is simply not true in all cases. With Piper and with others, the controls were tightened and re-tightened to the extreme and the effects just kept on coming.

Amazing Omission

Some debunkers seem quite adept at making relevant facts disappear. Consider, for example, this performance taken from one überskeptic’s on-line newsletter.

The critic begins a segment by offering “a few excerpts, with my comments, about a recent news article ...” This article is about Allison Dubois, the psychic who was the model for the TV show *Medium*. He does not give the

name of the newspaper, nor the author, nor any citation that might encourage his readers to look at the entire article.³ He offers a critique of a couple of the minor examples of Dubois’ paranormal insights as described in the article. He then dismisses the article and changes the subject.

I must say that this critic did precisely what he said he would do — he offered his comments on a few excerpts. And his criticisms have some merit, although his sarcasm is a bit over the top. The trouble lies in what he did not offer.

The newspaper article from which his excerpts were taken is the very same article that tells the story of Phran Ginsberg, whose teenage daughter, Bailey, died in a car crash in 2002. Let’s take a look at the rest of the story.

Dr. Schwartz had set up a telephone connection between Ginsberg, in New York, and Dubois, in Arizona. Neither party knew the other, and Ginsberg was not allowed to speak. Thus, the possibility of prior investigation by the medium was ruled out and educated guesses based on feedback (*i.e.*, cold reading) were impossible.

The article continues:

The first thing Dubois said was that she saw a photo of her daughter hugging her sister at a party. At that moment, Ginsberg was looking at a photo of the scene.

"Then she told me Bailey wished me 'Happy Valentine's Day.' And that didn't make sense, because it was October," [Ginsberg] said. But later that day, she took the photo from its frame, and on the back Bailey had written 'Valentine's Day Dance.' ...

Dubois also had described the accident and Bailey's fatal head injury.⁴

Describing Bailey's head injury is particularly striking for a reading without feedback, but that could be attributed to mental telepathy. The truly evidential piece, of course, is the reference to information known to no living person — the link between the picture and Valentine's Day.

Whether or not this one account is sufficient proof of life after death is a matter for debate, but when überskeptics bring up only irrelevancies while failing to discuss the really impressive evidence, they do their followers a grave disservice.

False Consensus

This is claiming that most people agree with your position without offering any evidence thereof. Consider, for example, the statement: "Reincarnation may be defined as the view that human beings do not, **as most of us assume**, live only once." This phrase, taken from a series of articles on reincarnation, is both prejudicial and false. The majority of Earth's inhabitants believe in some form of reincarnation and the writer cites no survey of his readership to determine their beliefs in the matter.

Pretended Ignorance

This requires blatantly ignoring all existing evidence in favor of something you reject or against something you embrace. Pointing out that another dimension is not necessary for some views of reincarnation, one professional skeptic wrote that it does not depend on "a mysterious realm whose location cannot be specified and which has never been seen or otherwise observed by anybody." In truth,

there is ample testimony from people and spirits who have experienced these realms.

Arguments Not Evidence

In philosophy and mathematics one can prove something by argument alone, but in the real world, proof requires evidence. A thousand lengthy expositions as to why something cannot be are no match for a single citation of that something occurring. Überskeptics often drone on for page after page citing this argument and that argument, all the while refusing to seriously consider any evidence. This is reminiscent of the ancient arguments for the earth being the center of the universe, or the more recent "scientific proofs" that stones cannot fall from the sky.

Incomprehensible Equals Impossible

According to many critics, the most important argument against survival after death is the "body-mind dependence" argument. Many thousands of words have been devoted to various aspects of this argument, but the überskeptics could save us all a lot of eyestrain by condensing their polemics into one simple sentence, to wit: "I don't understand how it could work, therefore it cannot be."

If only they would follow Dr. Jung's lead when that famous psychiatrist stated: "I shall not commit the fashionable stupidity of regarding everything I cannot explain as a fraud."⁵

The idea that "inexplicable equals impossible" is echoed throughout the writings and speeches of überskeptics. Time and again the believer is asked to explain how the mind can survive the death of the brain, or where heaven is located, or why an elderly person's spirit might appear as a younger version of himself, and so on. The answer to all such

questions must be “No one knows for sure.” But if you are ever faced with such a challenge, you might add that no one knows why electricity works. And no one has ever seen a memory trace in the brain. And, to get down to the real nitty-gritty, no one knows how action-at-a-distance is possible, either. In short, the reality of something is not dependent on our being able to understand it.

God save us from the arrogance of scientists, the condescension of magicians, and the smugness of philosophers!

∞

Copyright 2007 by Miles Edward Allen

- ¹. Hodgson studied Piper almost continuously from 1887 until his death in 1905.
- ². Hodgson, Richard, “A Further Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, 1897-8, vol. XIII, pp.284-582.
- ³. Written by Carla McClain and headed “Varied readings on Arizona psychic” the article appeared in the *Arizona Daily Star* on 17 January 2005.
- ⁴. Bob Ginsberg, Phran’s husband, points out in correspondence with the author that the actual sequence of events was somewhat different than the newspaper article relates (for instance, the statement about the photo was not the first thing Dubois said and Phran did not take the picture from the frame until the next day). Nevertheless, these variations do not affect the strength of the evidence.
- ⁵. Carl Gustave Jung, Speech to the SPR, 1919.