

individually and collectively, were still the most important physical entities in existence. It's this egocentric, anthropocentric core of our beliefs that bothers me and makes me suspect all man-made divinities and their doings. Our gods cater too much to our little existences. And we remember our own infantilisms, our own certainties at the age of three that the world and everything in it were there to please and to attend to us. Having lost the breast, we need the universe as our pacifier. I can't help thinking we can do better than this.

But without gods to care for and about us, won't life lose its meaning, its

purpose? Not only the devout but existentialists as well have decided it must. As someone said, Sartre never forgave God for not existing, just as some people never forgive their mothers for having weaned them. That's the danger of believing in things as tenuous as gods: once we lose them, we're inclined to go to pieces and decide that life is pointless, absurd, not worth having. But somehow the grownups among us go on to make their own points to their own lives, even without the gods, even without Jean-Paul Sartre. The normal four-year-old begins to suspect that the universe doesn't exist for him. Why do we find it so difficult

an accomplishment? Life doesn't become purposeless just because we don't own the universe. And anyway, what would we *do* with the universe!

One hundred years ago Mark Twain tussled with this problem, humankind as consummate purpose of the universe: "If the Eiffel Tower were now representing the world's age, the skin of paint on the pinnacle-knob at its summit would represent man's share of that age; and anybody would perceive that that skin was what the tower was built for. I reckon they would. I dunno."

A century on and I still reckon they would. Maybe they wouldn't. I dunno.

## The Courtney Brown Affair and Academic Freedom

SCOTT O. LILIENFELD

Academic freedom—the right of faculty members to pursue and discuss whatever interests they wish, no matter how outlandish or repugnant others might find them—is a cornerstone of institutions of higher learning. Without it, the very rationale undergirding that remarkable democratic organization we call a university crumbles. Nevertheless, there are inevitably times when academic freedom conflicts with a university's best interests. When this occurs, vexing pragmatic and ethical questions arise.

A prominent example of this conflict involves Courtney Brown, an associate professor in the political science department at Emory University, where I am also a faculty member (in psychology). Brown's actions and words have, to put it mildly, aroused considerable ridicule and controversy at Emory and in the

broader academic community. In his new book, *Cosmic Voyages: A Scientific Discovery of Extraterrestrials Visiting Earth*, Brown claims to use powers of "remote viewing" (an alleged psychic ability permitting individuals to "see" objects at enormous distances) to visit Mars and observe the actions of aliens. He purports to have uncovered indisputable evidence that two races of extraterrestrials, Martians and Greys, left their home planets centuries ago and have taken up residence in the dark recesses of Earth.

But Brown does not stop there. His remote viewing methods, which are "as rigorously controlled as those used in any solid social science text," have revealed that Adam and Eve were architects of a genetic engineering project and that numerous *Star Trek* episodes were written with the assistance of aliens. In one of the book's more remarkable chapters, "The Grey Mind," Brown claims to have "entered the mind" of an extraterrestrial and investi-

gated its psychological make-up. Brown, who directs the "Farsight Institute" in Atlanta, offers seminars—at a cost of \$3,000 per head—that promise to provide attendees with the psychic abilities he has mastered.

One hardly knows where to begin. Brown's book is remarkable for its virtually complete absence of any data that would qualify as scientific by even the most liberal evidential standards. His "findings" consist entirely of unverified subjective experiences, and the reader searches in vain for anything vaguely resembling a controlled experiment. Brown neglects to mention either the results of a recent government-appointed scientific panel on remote viewing, which concluded that "evidence for the operational value of remote viewing is not available, even after a decade of attempts," or the critiques of Ray Hyman, a psychologist at the University of Oregon, who has shown that the scientific evidence in support of remote viewing is seriously

---

Scott O. Lilienfeld is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322.

flawed. Philosopher David Hume maintained that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence; Brown's evidence is, to be charitable, singularly unimpressive.

In light of Brown's claims, I recently challenged him to a test of his alleged psychic abilities. I proposed that he appear at a meeting of my undergraduate seminar Science and Pseudoscience in Psychology, where my students and I would subject him to a simple controlled experiment examining his capacity to remotely view stimuli in an adjacent room. I assured him that he would have considerable input regarding the selection of stimulus materials and agreed to publicize the results of this test in both of Emory's two newspapers, regardless of its outcome.

But Brown categorically refused. His reasoning was curious: In his e-mail response to me, he asserted that "tests of the type you have talked about are very old hat" and that the current status of remote viewing "goes light-years beyond that which your letter suggests." But if Brown's psychic powers are as advanced as he claims, shouldn't he be able to pass an elementary test of these powers with flying colors? Brown also declined my offer on the grounds that he did "not want to drag Emory into [his] other activities" and that he is "rigorous about not mixing what [he does] elsewhere with what [he does] at Emory."

*This rationale seems disingenuous at best.* If Brown did not wish to involve Emory in his exploits, why did he list his academic affiliation with Emory in his book and on his web site? Brown apparently wants to have it both ways: He publicizes his association with Emory when it might afford him the imprimatur of academic legitimacy, but refuses to submit to scientific tests by Emory colleagues on the grounds that he does not wish to "drag Emory" into a firestorm of controversy. But it is too late: Emory's reputation has already been besmirched. As George Armelagos of Emory's Department of Anthropology notes, "Brown is naive if he believes his fantasies do not affect the image of the University."

Why should we at Emory care about

## A Statement about Professor Courtney Brown

*The following is the slightly abridged text of an open letter from William M. Chace, president of Emory University:*

Professor Courtney Brown is a member of the Emory faculty and teaches in the Department of Political Science. His published work in social science has received very favorable recognition from experts in the field. Independently of this professional work, he has recently established and runs the "Farsight Institute," an organization having no relationship whatever with Emory University, and from which it receives no support. Professor Brown has declared that he will not commingle his responsibilities at Emory with this other activity. To the best of our knowledge, he has honored that pledge. Under these circumstances, he is free to pursue his endeavors with his institute.

The principles of academic freedom, as well as the liberties granted

to all American citizens, do not permit this university or any other university to constrain the ideas or opinions of any of its faculty members. . . . Universities do not exist to shelter received opinion or to affirm what everyone knows. They serve instead to stimulate originality of thought and independence of expression. Since error is often the companion of truth, and since truth is always to be sought yet never to be gained, universities have always had an intimate acquaintance with falsehood.

While I do not agree with the content of Professor Brown's non-Emory activities, he certainly has the right to pursue them.

—William M. Chace

Brown? Many of his Emory colleagues will surely suggest that he is best ignored. But such an attitude would be misguided. As the late Carl Sagan argued in his 1996 book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, the public's inability to think critically about scientific issues is an unappreciated source of our educational and social woes.

By remaining silent on Brown's shenanigans, we do our students, who desperately need role models of clear reasoning, a serious disservice. Moreover, we leave ourselves open to criticisms such as those of Robert Baker, psychologist at the University of Kentucky, who has suggested that the Brown affair "bring(s) into question whether Emory has any high scientific standards."

So how should Emory respond to Brown? I would argue that Brown's academic freedom be protected unconditionally and that we defend his right to

pursue his interests without threat of official sanction or penalty. Nevertheless, academic freedom also gives Brown's colleagues license to criticize him openly. It is incumbent on qualified Emory faculty to inform the public that Brown's assertions are scientifically irresponsible and that his money-making ventures and refusal to submit himself to independent tests of his paranormal claims are ethically reprehensible.

Academic freedom, like all freedoms (e.g., the right to vote), becomes meaningless when not exercised. Let us not forfeit it at a time when Emory's reputation as a serious institution of higher learning is being challenged.

\* \* \*

See also Martin Gardner's review of Courtney Brown's book *Cosmic Voyage* on page 14.