

Scientific Skepticism, CSICOP, and the Local Groups

.....

Scientific skepticism defines skepticism around the principles of scientific investigation. Specifically, scientific skepticism addresses testable claims; untestable claims are simply outside the realm of science.

STEVEN NOVELLA and DAVID BLOOMBERG

The term *skepticism* has a number of meanings, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings between those who use the word one way and those who interpret it another. Of particular interest, and frequently the focus of such misunderstandings, is the stance of skeptics and organized skepticism toward religion and faith. This article will address that issue by defining the term *skepticism* as it is used by most local skeptical organizations—at least in the view of the authors.

Let us first recall that this magazine is published by the Committee for the *Scientific* Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. The word *scientific* is emphasized here with good reason—it is not the Committee for Philosophical

Discussions or the Committee for Religious Debates. The very name of this organization dedicates itself to scientific investigations. The local groups generally echo this viewpoint—often by stating directly that they are dedicated to the application of the scientific method to paranormal and fringe-science phenomena. We will use the term *scientific skeptics* to denote those who share this viewpoint.

There are others who believe that religion is a fair topic for skeptical analysis; we will use the term *rationalists* to denote these, because proponents of this view often promote the idea that atheism, or at least non-theism, and skepticism are both part of the same rationalist philosophy. Under this philosophy, a rationalist takes a materialistic, scientific approach to the world and renounces all superstition. *There is no distinction between believing in leprechauns, alien abductions, ESP, reincarnation, or the existence of a god—each equally lacks objective evidence.*

From this perspective, separating out the latter two beliefs and labeling them as religion—thereby exempting them from critical analysis—is intellectually dishonest. Rationalists often conclude that such behavior is motivated by a desire to avoid those superstitions that are most prominent in our particular culture out of fear of being excessively controversial. For one who promotes rationalism, the most widespread and sacredly guarded superstitions are the most important ones to oppose, for they have the greatest influence and can therefore do the most harm.

Scientific skepticism, however, defines skepticism more around the principles of scientific investigation than around the broader concept of rationalism. According to this view, there is a meaningful distinction between different kinds of beliefs. Specifically, scientific skepticism addresses testable claims, focusing on those that are controversial because they deal with the paranormal or the fringes of science, areas traditionally lacking adequate scientific rigor.

Untestable Claims

Claims that are not testable are simply outside the realm of science. A good example of this is the old creationist argument that God created the world to appear exactly as if it had evolved naturally over four billion years, fossils and all. This claim is certainly consistent with the evidence, but it makes no predictions that can be tested against future observations. In fact, it is designed to eliminate any observable distinction between an evolved and a created world. It is therefore important to identify such claims as untestable and therefore non-scientific because such claims are worthless to the advancement of knowledge. They cannot, by definition, be eliminated through evidence; therefore they must be banished to a realm outside of science.

What can a scientific skeptics' group say about such claims? Only that they are outside the realm of science, and that science can have only an agnostic view toward untestable hypotheses. A rationalist may argue that maintaining an arbi-

trary opinion about an untestable hypothesis is irrational—and he may be right. But this is a philosophical argument, not a scientific one. If an individual makes a personal choice to maintain a belief regarding an untestable hypothesis with no claims to evidence in support of that belief, then there is no scientific basis on which to challenge the belief. It is best labeled *faith*, which distinguishes it from a belief based on evidence.

The most obvious such belief is a person's answer to the question, "Does God exist?" There is simply no scientific way to know the answer to this. Certainly many people think they know the answer, and that is satisfying to them. Some have written entire books on why the universe does not need to have a god, but that does not prove that a god is nonexistent. Indeed, any omnipotent being worth his salt should be able to create a universe that doesn't have obvious inconsistencies in it.

The position of scientific skepticism is consistent, pragmatic, and allows the skeptical movement to precisely and confidently define the focus of its mission.

So that question comes down purely to faith. Either you believe in a god, or you don't. Science cannot answer that question.

Faith and Science

The real distinction made by scientific skepticism is not between religion and nonreligion, but between faith and science. A faith-based belief may be religious, New Age, paranormal, or even social. Testable religious claims, such as those of creationists, faith healers, and miracle men, however, are amenable to scientific skepticism. Therefore, anyone who claims to have scientific evidence for the existence of God has stepped into the scientific arena and is now open to skeptical criticism. These claims are part of the heart and soul (if you'll excuse the metaphor) of CSICOP and the local skeptics groups. But an individual professing a personal faith in God, who does not try to justify this faith with evidence, is immune to scientific arguments.

One criticism that has been leveled at this view is that we are merely trying to avoid offending people. Certainly, that is one part of it—but not for the reason that charge is leveled. Some rationalists have often assumed that all skeptics must be, like them, nontheists. As we've said, they often do not understand how one can be a skeptic and at the same time hold religious beliefs. Experiences in the local groups, however, show that one can indeed be a skeptic and still be religious. REALL, the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land, has

Steven Novella, M.D., is the president and co-founder of the New England Skeptical Society (NESS). David Bloomberg is the chairman and co-founder of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL).

among its Patron members a retired reverend and a rabbinical school applicant (along with several outspoken atheists). Other local group leaders have similar examples; one even advertises its meetings in a church newsletter! So it certainly would offend those people to assume all skeptics to be non-theists. They are working to advance the same cause—the same way of thinking—as all the other skeptics are, so why should we push them away?

An argument often advanced against this position is that we do not accept others who hold beliefs contrary to our way of thinking, such as those who believe in astrology or creationism, so why should we treat these people with religious beliefs any differently? Because religious beliefs are beyond the scope of scientific inquiry, there is no more reason to discriminate against those with religious beliefs than there is to discriminate because of race, sexual preference, or political party. None of us would ever think of doing the latter, so why should anybody suggest the former?

Most of the local groups, including REALL and the New England Skeptical Society, officially profess the position of scientific skepticism. The compelling reason for this is that the definition of scientific skepticism provides a sound and internally consistent self-definition. Our roles are clearly defined—to defend science, to promote the scientific method as the best route to reliable knowledge about the universe, to challenge testable claims of a pseudoscientific, paranormal, or otherwise fringe nature, and to promote education, especially of science

and critical thinking.

Without such a clearly defined focus, we risk being caught up in activities that may be only tangentially related to scientific skepticism. For example, the majority of our members probably oppose prayer in public schools, may support gay rights, and have strong feelings on abortion, but it is simply not the purpose of our organizations to expend our resources in such directions.

In addition, as a practical aspect to the focus on testable claims, our goal of teaching critical thinking and reason would be greatly hampered if we were perceived as being anti-religious. This single issue, which is not central to our purpose, could potentially drain our resources, monopolize our public image, and alienate many potential skeptics.

We should never be hesitant to scrutinize claims just because they have religious attachments—else we could not look at weeping icons, faith healers, Bible code finders, or fortunetellers who hang crosses in their windows. But systems of faith alone belong to the philosophers, not to the scientific skeptics like us.

The position of scientific skepticism is consistent, pragmatic, and allows the skeptical movement to precisely and confidently define the focus of its mission. Those who would prefer philosophical investigation have many other organizations to draw upon—including one that shares a headquarters building, and many members, with CSICOP. But CSICOP itself must stay true to its name and focus on *scientific* investigation. □

You can make a lasting impact on the future of skepticism...

when you provide for the *Skeptical Inquirer* in your will.

CSICOP and the *Skeptical Inquirer* changed the terms of discussion in fields ranging from pseudoscience and the paranormal to science and educational policy. You can take an enduring step to preserve their vitality when you provide for the *Skeptical Inquirer* in your will.

Your bequest to CSICOP, Inc., will help to provide for the future of skepticism as it helps to keep the *Skeptical Inquirer* financially secure. Depending on your tax situation, a charitable bequest to CSICOP may have little impact on the net size of your estate—or may even result in a greater amount being available to your beneficiaries.

We would be happy to work with you and your attorney in the development of a will or estate plan that meets your wishes. A variety of arrangements are possible, including: gifts of a fixed amount or a percentage of your estate; living trusts or gift annuities, which provide you with a lifetime income; or a contingent bequest that provides for the *Skeptical Inquirer* only if your primary beneficiaries do not survive you.

For more information, contact Barry Karr, Executive Director of CSICOP,
at (716) 636-1425. All inquiries are held in the strictest confidence.