

Fallacies and Frustrations

Why Skeptics Dread Conversations with True Believers

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Skeptics often hesitate to engage in conversations with believers in the paranormal because these conversations are usually very frustrating. Paranormal adherents tend to make fallacious use of language, logical arguments, and established knowledge. Yet skeptics must acknowledge and work past these frustrations to further the cause of rational inquiry.

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How many times has the following situation happened to you: You're at a party or social event, distractedly sipping your beverage of choice, when suddenly the conversation turns to paranormal or pseudo-scientific topics. You squirm in your chair, dreading the moment you know is coming. Hoping the topic will change, you look at your watch, drink your beverage just a little too quickly, and nervously adjust your shirt collar. Then, the moment you've been dreading finally comes. Someone asks you for your opinion.

Why should situations like this be so uncomfortable for skeptics? It isn't usually because we lack confidence in our opinions, because skeptics usually have much more knowledge

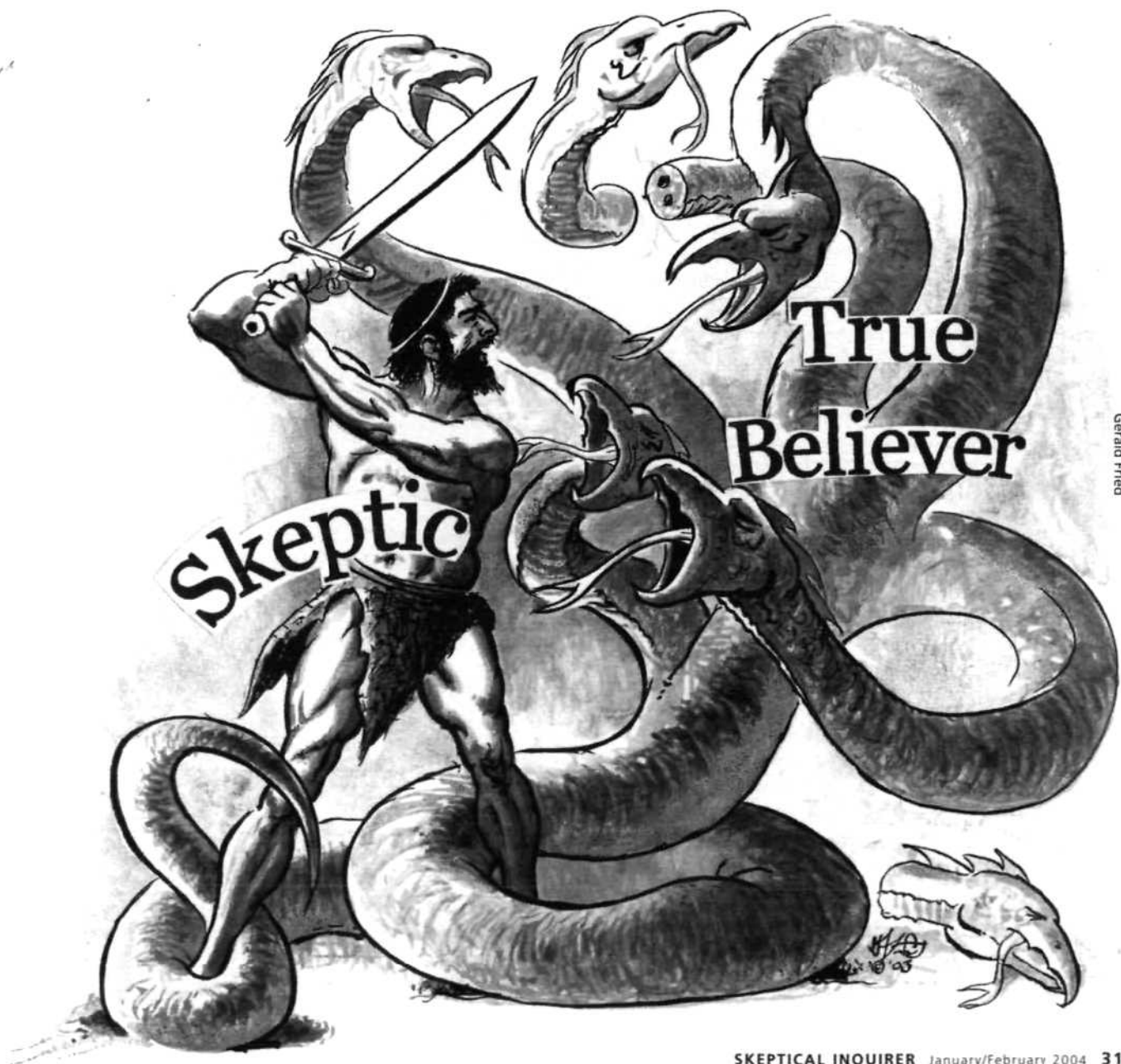
about paranormal topics and the rules of critical thinking than the general public. Rather, the cause of our anxiety is usually the awareness that the ensuing conversation is likely to be unproductive and extremely frustrating for us. We know that our acquaintances are certain to derail the discussion with countless argumentative fallacies, and our efforts to refute these fallacies are more likely to result in exasperation than in enlightenment. There are many varieties of these obstacles to rational discourse, but most of them involve misuses of language, logical blunders, or ignorance of the facts and ideas relevant to the issues.

Fallacies of Language

Much of the frustration we skeptics encounter arises from the seeming inability of many people to correctly use and understand language. It shouldn't be this way. Most people have some

schooling during their lives, and presumably learn how to distinguish the meaning of one word from another. Moreover, dictionaries can clear up any remaining confusion unaddressed by our formal education. But yet, when the crucial moment comes for people to read or listen to someone else's argument and discern its meaning, they often stumble. They seem unable to comprehend that words already have well-established definitions, and it isn't permissible to make up their own whenever convenient opportunities arise.

Consider the following example, assembled from various actual discussions in which it has been the author's misfortune to participate. Suppose you're discussing an Arts and Entertainment network program about the amazing fulfillment of biblical prophecies that claims the apocalypse will soon be upon us. Your acquaintance wonders how you can deny that so many of the Bible's "predictions," such as the



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onset of atomic warfare, the AIDS epidemic, and unprecedented numbers of wartime deaths, are now coming true. You object that there are not unprecedented levels of warfare or illness epidemics in our time; in fact, other historical periods had far higher death counts. More important, you point out that the Bible never actually “predicted” any of these things, because the definition of *prediction* implies an unambiguous assertion that a specific future event will happen in a specific

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way. Playing games with language to link vague phrases from the Bible to specific events in our own time is not logically permissible, and runs roughshod over the conclusions of sound scholarship. Real scholars, familiar with historically informed Bible criticism published in peer-reviewed academic journals, reject the idea that biblical prophets were talking about anything remotely similar to AIDS or other twentieth-century calamities. Such a selective and uncritical reading of the Bible does not serve anyone’s purpose, religious or otherwise.

“Maybe you’re talking about the tension between academics and faith,” he offers. You can’t recall talking about anything remotely like this, so you reject his attempted solution. “No I wasn’t,” you say, “and anyway, there doesn’t seem to be any necessary tension between ‘academics,’ as you say, and religious faith. Many academic Bible scholars of exceedingly high reputation are men of faith, and while not all of them believe in the same way that most people do, they nonetheless do believe.”

“That’s not what I meant,” your acquaintance answers, “for now I see that instead of saying ‘academics,’ I should have said ‘reason.’ I really meant to say that we cannot disprove the tenets of faith. Bible prophecies are matters of faith, which has nothing at all to do with reason.” Now you don’t even know where to start. You can’t help but wonder how your acquaintance initially confused the meaning of *reason* with *academics*, and wonder why he thinks that just because something isn’t completely disprovable, it has nothing to do with reason. After all, it’s also impossible to disprove the notion that an invisible, colorless, odorless, tasteless, noncorporeal goblin is lurking in

my basement, although few sane people would find this reason enough to believe the goblin exists. Therefore you reply by saying that people generally believe things that seem at least plausible to them, even if faith also involves going beyond what we can know through reason.

Since things are going badly for his arguments, your acquaintance pushes even further into definitional dubiousness. “I see clearly where your confusion lies,” he says, “because you were using an alternate definition of *reason*. I was using the word *reason* in its ‘classical’ sense, as a term for ‘science.’ In that sense, faith has nothing to do with reason, because science cannot disprove the tenets of religious faith.”

Once again, you find yourself perplexed by the shifting pattern of fallacious definitions on display. You can’t help but wonder if your acquaintance is trying to redefine the entire debate in terms that automatically support his conclusions. You’re frustrated by his repeated failure to accurately use and understand the existing definitions of words. You try to explain that *reason* is not a synonym for *science*, in its “classical” sense or any other sense, and that there is a complicated relationship between science and religion that should preclude us from making simple judgments about their interactions. In addition, *disproof* means something rather different to a scientist than it does to a layperson. But your acquaintance, gleefully unencumbered by any adherence to word definitions, still sees *reason* as being identical to *science*, and for good measure, even accuses you of shifting the definitions of the debate terms to find fault with his arguments. Through the most ironic redefinition of all, the skeptic is now the one who doesn’t understand how to use words correctly, and our good-natured acquaintance can only marvel at our verbal ignorance.

Fallacies of Logic

Assuming our opponents know the correct definitions of the relevant terms, there’s still a great chance that they’ll make debates frustrating for us. Most people do not have the critical thinking skills necessary to craft good arguments, and continually try to pass off logical fallacies as sound reasoning. It would require an entire book to catalogue and describe all of the logical fallacies the skeptic encounters in his travels among the credulous, but I will list a few of the most common varieties.

The *false dichotomy* presents an issue as an all-or-nothing choice between only two alternatives. When presenting an issue as a false dichotomy, a person is usually trying to simplify a complicated issue into terms he can more easily understand, and render his own opinion more plausible in the process. For instance, paranormal true believers frequently use false dichotomies in arguments about the validity of the anecdotal evidence offered to support claims of ghost sightings, alien visitations, and other Fortean phenomena.

Paranormalists often maintain that the people who claim to

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have had these experiences must be telling the truth, or they must be either lying or crazy. Since there is often no reason to think that people reporting paranormal experiences are clinically insane or documented liars, believers confidently rule out the second half of their artificial dichotomy and conclude that the paranormal claims must be true. "Why would they make this up?" they triumphantly ask. They seem unaware that there are many other possible explanations. [See John McDonald, "200% Probability and Beyond: The Compelling Nature of Extraordinary Claims in the Absence of Alternative Explanations," SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, January/February 1998.]

A witness may believe he is telling the truth, but his perception and memory of the events may be distorted by many psychological and social factors. However, full awareness of these other options requires strong knowledge about psychology, sociology, and the subtle effects of culture on what we see and remember. It's much easier to just reduce the whole issue to two choices.

The *fallacy of personal preference assumptions* is a species of argumentative fallacy that I have not seen discussed before. This fallacy conveniently assumes that people who report paranormal experiences have personality traits that guarantee the authenticity of their reports. Let me explain.

Suppose one of our friends wants to visit a hotel allegedly haunted by ghosts, according to the informative hosts of the History Channel's show "Haunted History." The television program supplies anecdotes about former guests who claim to have seen or felt ghostly visitors during their stay at the hotel. The obvious skeptical response is that the guests had foreknowledge of the ghost legends surrounding the hotel, and this knowledge caused them to imagine their spectral visitors. But hearing this explanation, our acquaintance replies that if they had known about the legends, they never would have stayed at the hotel!

Presumably, their fear of seeing a ghost would have kept them away. Therefore, no one who visited a haunted hotel could have had foreknowledge of haunting legends that may influence their observations. Thus, our paranormalist friend concludes, all observations of ghostly phenomena at the hotel must be objective and reliable. This reply blatantly ignores the obvious fact that our acquaintance herself wants to visit the hotel, and knows very well that it is allegedly haunted. In fact, that's the whole reason she wants to visit the hotel! How can she assume that the other visitors, who probably watch the same popular television shows about ghosts and have the same widespread fascination with the supernatural, would refuse to stay at a "haunted hotel?" Such an assumption claims a knowledge of the personal preference of the guests that she cannot possibly have. Clearly we cannot rule out the strong possibility that the guests may have had prior expectations that com-

promised their reliability as witnesses. Equally clearly, we cannot make personality preference assumptions wherever convenient opportunities arise.

This fallacy allows our acquaintance to surmise that the hotel guests have personality traits different from her own and from those of the general public, simply because this assumption makes their testimony about ghostly visitors more plausible.

The *post hoc fallacy* consists of automatically attributing the cause of a phenomenon, after the fact, to an unrelated event preceding it. This fallacy seems to be deeply ingrained in the thinking habits of our species. David Hume, in his classic *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, provided a psychological description of the process through which people perceive causation, and showed that events that closely precede a phenomenon in time are most likely to be seen as causes of that phenomenon. Sometimes this habit leads us to correct assumptions, but often it leads us to find causal relationships where none actually exist. The most common examples of a *post hoc* fallacy involve superstitions, such as belief in "lucky" items of clothing. For example, someone buys a new shirt and

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suddenly finds herself awarded with a big promotion at work. There's no logical reason to think that the shirt had anything to do with her promotion, especially since management probably made the decision long before she ever set foot inside the clothing store. But the close association of the two events in time seems strangely compelling, and she reaches the *post hoc* conclusion that her lucky shirt was the cause of her new prosperity. The skeptic who tries to argue with her is likely to be in for a frustrating time.

The argument from incredulity maintains that if we cannot easily imagine the proposition is true, we are justified in concluding that it is false. This strategy uses the assumption that whatever is not instantly comprehensible must be wrong. Creationists are masters of arguments from incredulity, and use every available opportunity to portray evolution as the far-fetched pipe dream of egghead scientists. Science-fiction writer and Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, who was a creationist of a particularly odd sort, once described evolution as a modern

variant of an ancient Egyptian myth describing the magical appearance of the first living creatures from primordial ooze. Creationists want evolution to seem as though it argues that man sprung fully-formed from the chaos of nature like Athena from the forehead of Zeus—an idea clearly too ridiculous to believe. Of course, the use of this strategy saves its proponents the bother of actually learning something about the issues they're discussing, or acknowledging that some familiarity with the philosophy of science and the methods of critical thinking could prove beneficial to them. It also tends to skew evaluation of ideas toward arguments that seem plausible to most people, regardless of their validity. Arguments from incredulity wallow in a vulgar populism that elevates appeal to unlearned prejudice to a categorical imperative, and rejects as meaningless all attempts to achieve deeper understandings.

Fallacies of Ignorance

If I had to pick the most common source of frustration for skeptics, I'd have to choose plain old garden-variety ignorance. Ignorance involves knowing very little, or at least not nearly enough, about the issues one is discussing. Far too often, impaired knowledge of an issue does not deter people from offering their opinions about it, and from being absolutely sure that their ideas are the very embodiment of informed rationalism. As the observant reader may have already noticed, ignorance is related to all of the frustrations and fallacies already discussed. Indeed, it is the center of the credulous person's universe. It is the foundation of every logical fallacy, the cause of every miscomprehension, and the font of all foolishness.

There are countless examples of ignorance at work. Historical ignorance is present whenever right-wing pundits claim that the United States began as a Christian nation, and whenever left-wing pundits argue that Native Americans lived in perfect harmony with nature. We see scientific ignorance when creationists claim there is no empirical evidence for evolution, and misguided consumer-rights groups try to eliminate the fluoridation of drinking water. In all these cases, the claimants do not adequately understand the issues at hand.

Ignorance does not always have to involve plain fact, such as the month Abraham Lincoln originally planned the Emancipation Proclamation or the age of the oldest known hominid fossil. Often, it takes the more general and pervasive form of simply being unaware that there is anything more to an issue than what one already knows about it. This kind of ignorance is especially prevalent among paranormalists, who often learn everything they know about a particularly poltergeist haunting or UFO abduction by watching Discovery Channel programs, and aren't aware of the strong counterarguments and other parts of the story withheld from them. Few of the countless television specials about the Amityville "hauntings" mention the inconvenient fact that the originators of the stories admitted to perpetrating a hoax, or that the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle were definitively explained more than two decades ago. The public often fails to realize that programs such as those found on the Discovery Channel have a well-documented policy of denying airtime to anyone skeptical of paranormal claims.

Thomas Aquinas noted that ignorance is often consolatory, especially if it involves issues that we've already interpreted to our own liking. Finding further information about issues may dispel our ignorance of them, but may also threaten our happiness and self-esteem. Stories of ghosts are not only entertaining, but also allegedly provide comforting proof of life beyond death. Alien visitation stories suggest that we are not alone in the universe, and we may one day meet extraterrestrials. The alternate notions that ghosts do not exist and we have a greater chance of getting struck on the head by a meteor than we do of encountering intelligent alien life are somewhat disheartening. It's not surprising that most people don't want to expend effort to dispel their ignorance, if ignorance provides comfort.

Conclusions: Coping With Frustration

The net result of these frustrations is that we skeptics often feel wary of even attempting to engage in conversations with believers of dubious claims. We know we are very likely to encounter several fallacies discussed here in the course of a single discussion.

Each attempt to refute a fallacy causes our credulous acquaintance to commit about three new ones, which then require debunking of their own. And so it goes, until you're about twenty minutes into the conversation and realize you've gotten precisely nowhere. Our partners in conversation are too frequently unwilling or unable to critically examine their own assumptions, or think critically before offering their opinions. As a result, we find ourselves in the conversational equivalent of running on a treadmill. We can begin to understand what Leo Tolstoy meant when he said, "Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common, but it is essential for right thinking; where it is absent, discussion is apt to become worse than useless."

Accepting Tolstoy's diagnosis, many skeptics may wish to shun conversations with anyone who cannot think and talk at our own level. This would be a mistake, even if based partially on reality. It's easy for us to congratulate ourselves for our critical thinking abilities, but harder to realize that these same abilities do not make us morally superior to anyone, incapable of learning from nonskeptics, or exempt from the responsibilities of teaching others.

If skeptics truly wish to further the cause of rationality, we have to be active members of an often-credulous society. This often requires an enormous amount of patience, but this patience is not misplaced. One truly heartening fact is that, as philosopher Julian Baggini has pointed out, the rules of argumentative logic seem curiously self-evident when spelled out. Most people seem to be able to understand the difference between good arguments and bad ones at some level, even if they don't always honor this difference in practice. Many people also seem capable of recognizing fallacies of language, and generally do not relish the idea of being ignorant. All of these facts persuade me that the efforts of skeptics really can bear fruit, even if many more bare branches remain at any given time. We should not succumb to our frustrations so readily. □