



The Skepticism of Believers

Rupert Sheldrake

I used to think of skepticism as a primary intellectual virtue, whose goal was truth. I have changed my mind. I now see it as a weapon.

Creationists opened my eyes. They use the techniques of critical thinking to expose weaknesses in the evidence for natural selection, gaps in the fossil record and problems with evolutionary theory. Is this because they are seeking truth? No. They believe they already know the truth. Skepticism is a weapon to defend their beliefs by attacking their opponents.

Skepticism is also an important weapon in the defence of commercial self-interest. As an executive of the cigarette company Brown and Williamson put it in 1969, "Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public." According to David Michaels, who was assistant secretary for environment, safety and health in the US Department of Energy in the 1990s, the strategy of the tobacco industry has now been adopted by corporations making toxic products such as lead, mercury, vinyl chloride, and benzene. When confronted with evidence that their activities are causing harm, the standard response is to hire researchers to try and muddy the waters, branding findings that go against their interests as "junk science." As Michaels noted, "Their conclusions are almost always the same: the evidence is ambiguous, so regulatory action is unwarranted." Climate change skeptics use similar techniques.

Skepticism has even deeper roots in religion than in science. The Old Testament prophets were withering in their scorn for the rival religions of the Holy Land. Psalm 115 mocks those who make idols of silver and gold: "They have mouths, and

speak not: eyes have they, and hear not." At the Reformation, the Protestants deployed the full force of biblical scholarship and critical thinking against the veneration of relics, cults of saints and other "superstitions" of the Catholic Church. Atheists take religious skepticism to its ultimate limits; but they are defending another faith, a faith in science.

The use of skeptical weaponry is institutionalized within our legal and political systems. Defence lawyers are paid to be skeptical of the evidence for the prosecution, and prosecution lawyers of the defence. Opposition parties are skeptical of governments, and governments of other parties.

In a penetrating essay called "The Skepticism of Believers", Sir Leslie Stephen, a pioneering agnostic (and the father of Virginia Woolf), argued that skepticism is inevitably partial. "In regard to the great bulk of ordinary beliefs, the so-called skeptics are just as much believers as their opponents." Then as now, those who proclaim themselves skeptics had strong beliefs of their own. As Stephen put it in 1893, "The thinkers generally charged with skepticism are equally charged with an excessive belief in the constancy and certainty of the so-called 'laws of nature'. They assign a natural cause to certain phenomena as confidently as their opponents assign a supernatural cause."

In practice, the goal of skepticism is not the discovery of truth, but the exposure of other people's errors. It plays an essential role in science, religion, scholarship, business, journalism, politics, the legal system and common sense. But we need to remember that it is a weapon serving belief or self-interest; we need to be skeptical of skeptics, The more militant the skeptic, the stronger the belief.



Andrew Glazewski

A brief note by Dr Anthony Fox

I met Andrew firstly at Stover Camp (near Newton Abbott) in 1960.

Stover then was a safe haven for the older Polish people who had found refuge in the U K, especially from Joe Stalin and Co. Andrew was the leader of that community. He was a catholic priest who had worked as doctor and was very knowledgeable of Physics. I then lived a few miles away.

I only began to know the real Andrew in 1967 when I met him again in the home of Jenny (we later married). To a very orthodox medical student, Andrew rapidly 'widened my horizons'. We went for walks along Fingle Gorge, where Andrew introduced me to 'the other people'. Our friendship flourished. I regarded him as my 'Guru'. He taught very

carefully of the wider realities and energies of life. Besides being an undergraduate at the (now - Royal) London Hospital, I was also the editor of The London Hospital Gazette. In May 1967 I was very happy to publish the article by Andrew – "Can There Be Any Science behind Healing Hands". This was received with a mixed reception by the consultants. My tutor (Mike Flyer) was very interested and said to me in private that he considered good doctors and surgeons to have certain healing abilities with their patients.

I kept up my contact with Andrew until a year before he died. He was a remarkable man. *Readers are referred to Paul Kieniewicz's article in the previous issue and to Andrew's article available in Members' Articles.*