

## A State of Belief Is a State of Being

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**Abstract**—When students in a university classroom are invited to share anomalous stories, the “skeptical” tactics used to debunk them seem reasonable at first, but eventually reveal a worldview that is cynical, arrogant, dogmatic, and unfalsifiable. Because any new evidence can, with sufficient effort, be made to fit a preexisting paradigm, belief is seen to come down to choice. Moreover, like most belief systems, the worldview of the Skeptic has an emotional component, long ago identified by Bertrand Russell and others as a meaninglessness or despair inherent in classical science. The choice of belief therefore extends beyond a mere intellectual decision, to encompass one’s identity and relationship to the world. This approach conflicts with traditional scientific objectivity, which enjoins that belief be detached from such considerations. The relationship between observation and belief is more subtle than the traditional scientific view that the latter must follow dispassionately from the former. Indeed, the “experimenter effect” in parapsychology, as well as the mounting problems with objectivity in mainstream science, suggest a need to reconceive science and the Scientific Method in light of the crumbling of the assumption of objectivity upon which it is based.

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For several years now I have conducted a rather unusual activity in my classroom at Penn State. I ask my class—approximately 45 students representing a broad cross-section of the student body—to bring in a story that “doesn’t fit into scientific reality.” I tell them it could be anything—a ghost story, something with alternative medicine, a UFO sighting, a dream that came true, an experience with a fortune teller or Ouija board . . . anything. “If you’ve never had such an experience,” I say, “ask your friends and relatives.” The justification I give them beforehand is that by considering what our culture categorizes as “unscientific,” we will shed light on what the adjective “scientific” means as well.

When they begin sharing their stories in turn, I unleash a little surprise. I debunk their stories as best as I possibly can, using all the weapons in the Skeptical arsenal. I explain their stories away as confabulation, hallucination, and selective memory. I appeal to coincidence. I contrive mechanistic explanations. I impugn their integrity or the integrity of their friends. I accuse them of attention-seeking. I question their sanity. I imply they were on drugs, drinking too much, emotionally distraught, mentally unstable.

To give the reader a flavor for this exercise, I will share a few samples.

Michelle: "At 3:00 a.m., my mother woke up suddenly to see her mother looking over my brother's bassinet. She got scared from seeing such a thing, and when she looked back towards my brother, the image of my grandma was gone. My mom waited up all night worrying that something terrible happened. At 7:00 that same morning she got a call from her father saying that my grandma had passed away at 3:00 a.m. that night."

My debunking: "Your mother probably knew her mother was gravely ill, and was constantly worrying and obsessing about it, losing sleep (as you imply). In her distraught state, she even started hallucinating. It was just coincidence that your grandmother died around the time she had that hallucination. In fact, probably she didn't die at exactly the same time at all. The hallucination probably happened several hours or even days before her death, but for the sake of a dramatic story your family has remembered them as happening simultaneously. Probably your mother couldn't handle the intensity of the grief, so she created this story as part of her psychological mechanism of denial."

John: "In high school I had three pretty serious automobile accidents. Each time when I called home, my mother picked up the phone on the first ring and said immediately, 'Are you all right?' She only answered the phone like that those three times."

My debunking: "You are wrong, John, your mother answers the phone like that quite often, because she is a worry-bug who constantly imagines something terrible has happened to someone. So of course once in a while she gets it right, and those are the times you remember."

John: "No she's not, she's very sensible and down to earth."

Me: "You only think so because you've bought into it too and don't even notice anymore. You are probably emotionally dependent on your mother's overprotection. Poor baby, are you all right?"

Zack: "When I was around the age of 12, I had a very memorable dream. I was a gold prospector during the gold rush. In the dream I had my land marked off with rope, all my tools together and I was mining at Pikes Peak in California (sic). As the dream continued I went from prospector to having people mine for me. I was becoming more and more wealthy until one day an earthquake took my house and my family. I tried to rebuild but I couldn't. Everything in my life was beginning to fail. I couldn't understand why I was such a loser in life after all I had once achieved. I then woke up in my bed; it was time for school. I slipped on my clothes after my morning preparations. Around lunch time I reached into my jacket pocket to find money for the lunch lady and felt an oversized coin. The coin was dated 1880 and was solid gold. To this day I don't know where the coin came from and why it ended up in my pocket." (Upon questioning, Zack added that it was a \$20 gold piece in excellent condition. These are worth thousands of dollars today. How did such a thing get into a schoolboy's pocket?)

My debunking: "You had been interested in the Gold Rush, so as a joke, your dad or your uncle put that coin in your pocket. Your obsession with the Gold Rush also explains your vivid dream. Or maybe you had the gold piece and knew about it; actually you had it long before the dream, but remember finding it as after. Or, more likely still, Zack, you stole the coin from your dad's coin collection and felt guilty about it, so you made up a story about how it 'suddenly appeared' in your pocket. Come on, admit it!"

Chris was working as an emergency medical technician. Arriving at the scene of an accident, he was trying to decide which victim was the highest priority for treatment when a little girl tugged at his shirt and said, "Help my dad." Chris asked where her dad was and she pointed over the embankment into the woods. Scrambling down, he found a jogger, out of sight of the road, drifting in and out of

consciousness—apparently when the two vehicles collided they also hit the jogger. Loading him onto an ambulance, Chris yelled to a police officer to watch out for the jogger's daughter, but the police officer could not find her. A month later the jogger came to thank him and brought a cake. "How did you find me down there?" he asked. "Your daughter told me." "I don't have a daughter!"

My debunking: "Probably the girl was just a passenger in the car who saw the jogger get hit. She only called him daddy because she was disoriented from the accident."

One more example: Grandma's photo falls off the mantelpiece the moment she unexpectedly dies in another state.

My debunking: "It was just a sudden gust of wind. It was summer, right? Your windows were probably open. A photograph is not that heavy. Probably it wasn't the exact moment of her death. You just connected these two events in the human brain's natural proclivity to find patterns, to the point of projecting them onto random events."

If all else fails, there is always the file-drawer effect: "It was just coincidence. We never hear about the numerous times someone's photograph fell down and the person was perfectly okay, or when someone has a dream that doesn't come true." Another all-purpose response that I like to use when the stories are simply impossible to explain away is, "You are making this up, aren't you, Scott. You want us to think you are special, don't you?" But my favorite response in the college classroom (for recent experiences) is, "Say, Bill, were you drinking a lot around that time?" If it is a second-hand story, I can claim that the narrator was lied to, and that my judgment of the witness's integrity is better than his own. "Your grandmother is obviously mentally unstable, but you can't recognize it." With these techniques, I can explain anything.

As we go around the room, something rather unexpected happens. My first few explanations meet with general assent, judging from the heads I see nodding. (The response of the debunking "victim" is typically a dubious "I guess it could have happened that way," or a defiant, "You are wrong, I know it was real.") But after five or six stories, my efforts begin to seem contrived and my explanations decreasingly persuasive. The charges of selective memory, confabulation, attention-seeking, fraud, hallucination, coincidence, and so forth—along with a little character assassination when necessary—appear perfectly reasonable at first, but soon it becomes clear that the debunker himself is blindly committed to his own dogmatic worldview that is impervious to any evidence.

Let me hasten to add that Skepticism and belief represent two poles that are *both* present, to varying degrees, in any real person. (Throughout this essay I use "Skeptic" capitalized to denote a confirmed unbeliever, as exemplified by organizations that call themselves "skeptical.") Even the most hardened Skeptic has moments when he believes someone just because what is said rings true. Meanwhile, the most fervent believer sometimes finds herself saying, "That couldn't have happened, there must be some other explanation." Curiously, as I listen to my students' stories, I often hear both voices at once. Part of me is amazed even as another part dismisses the story. That latter part always craves proof, more and more proof. No amount is sufficient to quiet that voice, because another interpretation is always possible. At some point a decision to believe is

necessary. If I claimed I could control the flip of a coin, how many consecutive heads would it take to convince you? Ten? Twenty? That is a p-value of 0.000001, but it could still be coincidence, and conventions about p-values are no substitute for certainty. We can still choose to disbelieve. Or we can question the premises of the statistics. For the coin flipping, would you check my background to see if I were a trained stage magician? Would you examine the coin? Ask me to perform shirtless? Under video surveillance? And later, would you wonder whether you had just imagined it? No amount of proof can quench the thirst for certainty.

The unfalsifiable worldview of the Skeptic extends far beyond scientific paradigms to encompass a very cynical view of human nature. The debunker must buy into a world full of frauds, dupes, and the mentally unstable, where most people are less intelligent and less sane than he is, and in which apparently honest people indulge in the most outrageous mendacity for no good reason, for the witnesses are, on the face of it, sincere. How can I account for their apparent sincerity? I have to assume either (1) that this apparent sincerity is a cynical cover for the most base and fatuous motives, or (2) the witnesses are ignorant, incapable of distinguishing truth from lies and delusion.

Most of the Skeptical materials I have encountered invoke "reason" as the highest principle of human thought, implicitly assuming their authors to possess this virtue in superior quantities. Behind most Skeptical explanations is the belief "I am better (smarter, saner, etc.) than you are."

For example, when I offer a trivial mechanistic explanation (a gust of wind) of an anomalous event, I am implying that the witness is too incompetent or stupid an observer to consider it.

When I appeal to selective memory or confabulation, I am implying that the witness's own mentation is out of touch with objective reality . . . but I would not do that with *my* memories.

When I charge that the witness has been duped, I imply that he is incompetent and gullible, but that a rational, intelligent person like me would never be taken in by the fraud. I also imply that he is a poor judge of human character, unable to tell a conniving charlatan from a sincere person.

Many if not all of my explanations come down to one of the following:

- "I am a better judge of human character than you are."
- "You are missing an obvious explanation that I would have found if I were there"; in other words, "I am a better, more rational observer of reality than you are."
- Similarly, "You are a very poor observer."
- "You are mentally unstable; I would not be subject to such delusions."
- "You are lying; you are a person of inferior integrity."
- "It couldn't have happened because reality just is not like that." (Here I simply deny another person's experience. "I saw a UFO." "No you didn't!")











