Path:

news.otenet.gr!news.grnet.gr!irazu.switch.ch!switch.ch!newsfeed .berkeley.edu!ucberkeley!priapus.visi.com!orange.octanews.net!n ews.octanews.net!news-out.visi.com!petbe.visi.com!newsfeed2.dal las1.level3.net!news.level3.com!postnews1.google.com!not-for-mail

From: esoteric88_55@hotmail.com (esotericmaster)
Newsgroups: sci.skeptic,sci.astro,sci.physics

Subject: The Debunkers Checklist!! Date: 6 Dec 2003 21:48:46 -0800

Organization: http://groups.google.com

Lines: 324

Message-ID: <f69918bc.0312062148.2be4dbe8@posting.google.com>

NNTP-Posting-Host: 67.38.30.22

Content-Type: text/plain; charset=ISO-8859-1

Content-Transfer-Encoding: 8bit

X-Trace: posting.google.com 1070776126 15137 127.0.0.1 (7 Dec 2003 05:48:46 GMT)

X-Complaints-To: groups-abuse@google.com

NNTP-Posting-Date: Sun, 7 Dec 2003 05:48:46 +0000 (UTC) Xref: news.otenet.gr sci.skeptic:370948 sci.astro:223599 sci.physics:594986

http://www.tcm.phy.cam.ac.uk/~bdj10/scepticism/drasin.html

INTRODUCTION

skip intro and go straight to debunking manual.

So you've had a close encounter with a UFO. Or a serious interest in

the subject of extramundane life. Or a passion for following clues

that seem to point toward the existence of a greater reality. Mention

any of these things to most working scientists and be prepared for

anything from patronizing skepticism to merciless ridicule. After all,

science is supposed to be a purely hardnosed enterprise with little

patience for "expanded" notions of reality. Right?

Wrong.

Like all systems of truth seeking, science, properly conducted, has a

profoundly expansive, liberating impulse at its core. This
"Zen" in

the heart of science is revealed when the practitioner sets aside

arbitrary beliefs and cultural preconceptions, and approaches the

nature of things with "beginner's mind". When this is done, reality

can speak freshly and freely, and can be heard more clearly. Appropriate testing and objective validation can--indeed, must--come later.

Seeing with humility, curiosity and fresh eyes was once the main point

of science. But today it is often a different story. As the scientific

enterprise has been bent toward exploitation, institutionalization,

hyperspecialization and new orthodoxy, it has increasingly preoccupied

itself with disconnected facts in a psychological, social and ecological vacuum. So disconnected has official science become from

the greater scheme of things, that it tends to deny or disregard

entire domains of reality and to satisfy itself with reducing all of

life and consciousness to a dead physics.

As we approach the end of the millennium, science seems in many ways

to be treading the weary path of the religions it presumed to replace.

Where free, dispassionate inquiry once reigned, emotions now run high

in the defense of a fundamentalized "scientific truth". As anomalies

mount up beneath a sea of denial, defenders of the Faith and the

Kingdom cling with increasing self-righteousness to the hull of a

sinking paradigm. Faced with provocative evidence of things undreamt

of in their philosophy, many otherwise mature scientists revert to a

kind of skeptical infantilism characterized by blind faith in the

absoluteness of the familiar. Small wonder, then, that so many promising fields of inquiry remain shrouded in superstition, ignorance, denial, disinformation, taboo . . . and debunkery.

What is "debunkery"? Essentially it is the attempt to debunk (invalidate) new information and insight by substituting scientistic

propaganda for the scientific method.

To throw this kind of pseudoscientific behavior into bold--if somewhat.

comic--relief, I have composed a useful "how-to" guide for aspiring

debunkers. As will be obvious to the reader, I have carried a few of

these debunking strategies over the threshold of absurdity for the

sake of making a point. As for the rest, their inherently fallacious

reasoning, twisted logic and sheer goofiness will sound frustratingly

familar to those who have dared explore beneath the ocean of denial

and attempted in good faith to report back about what they found there.

So without further ado . . .

HOW TO DEBUNK JUST ABOUT ANYTHING

Before commencing to debunk, prepare your equipment. Equipment needed:

one armchair.

scientific authority.

Put on the right face. Cultivate a condescending air that suggests

that your personal opinions are backed by the full faith and credit of

God. Employ vague, subjective, dismissive terms such as
"ridiculous"

or "trivial" in a manner that suggests they have the full force of

Portray science not as an open-ended process of discovery but

holy war against unruly hordes of quackery-worshipping infidels. Since

in war the ends justify the means, you may fudge, stretch or violate

the scientific method, or even omit it entirely, in the name of defending the scientific method.

Keep your arguments as abstract and theoretical as possible. This will

"send the message" that accepted theory overrides any actual evidence

that might challenge it—and that therefore no such evidence is worth examining.

Reinforce the popular misconception that certain subjects are inherently unscientific. In other words, deliberately confuse the

process of science with the content of science. (Someone may, of

course, object that since science is a universal approach to truth-seeking it must be neutral to subject matter; hence, only the

investigative process can be scientifically responsible or irresponsible. If that happens, dismiss such objections using a method

employed successfully by generations of politicians: simply reassure

everyone that "there is no contradiction here!")

Arrange to have your message echoed by persons of authority. The

degree to which you can stretch the truth is directly proportional to

the prestige of your mouthpiece.

Always refer to unorthodox statements as "claims", which are "touted", and to your own assertions as "facts", which are "stated".

Avoid examining the actual evidence. This allows you to say with

impunity, "I have seen absolutely no evidence to support such ridiculous claims!" (Note that this technique has withstood the test

of time, and dates back at least to the age of Galileo. By simply

refusing to look through his telescope, the ecclesiastical authorities

bought the Church over three centuries' worth of denial free and clear!)

If examining the evidence becomes unavoidable, report back that "there

is nothing new here!" If confronted by a watertight body of evidence

that has survived the most rigorous tests, simply dismiss it as being $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) +\left(1$

"too pat".

Equate the necessary skeptical component of science with all of science. Emphasize the narrow, stringent, rigorous and critical elements of science to the exclusion of intuition, inspiration, exploration and integration. If anyone objects, accuse them of viewing

science in exclusively fuzzy, subjective or metaphysical terms.

Insist that the progress of science depends on explaining the unknown

in terms of the known. In other words, science equals reductionism.

You can apply the reductionist approach in any situation by discarding

more and more evidence until what little is left can finally

be explained entirely in terms of established knowledge.

Downplay the fact that free inquiry and legitimate disagreement are a normal part of science.

Make yourself available to media producers who seek "balanced reporting" of unorthodox views. However, agree to participate in only

those presentations whose time constraints and a priori bias preclude

such luxuries as discussion, debate and cross-examination.

At every opportunity reinforce the notion that what is familiar is

necessarily rational. The unfamiliar is therefore irrational, and

consequently inadmissible as evidence.

State categorically that the unconventional may be dismissed as, at

best, an honest misinterpretation of the conventional.

Characterize your opponents as "uncritical believers". Summarily dismiss the notion that debunkery itself betrays uncritical belief, albeit in the status quo.

Maintain that in investigations of unconventional phenomena, a single flaw invalidates the whole. In conventional contexts, however, you may sagely remind the world that, "after all, situations are complex and human beings are imperfect".

"Occam's Razor", or the "principle of parsimony", says the correct explanation of a mystery will usually involve the simplest fundamental principles. Insist, therefore, that the standard explanation is the correct one, since it involves no additional assumptions! Imply strongly that Occam's Razor is not merely a philosophical rule of thumb but an immutable law.

Discourage any study of history that may reveal today's dogma as yesterday's heresy. Likewise, avoid discussing the many historical, philosophical and spiritual parallels between science and democracy.

Since the public tends to be unclear about the distinction between evidence and proof, do your best to help maintain this murkiness. If absolute proof is lacking, state categorically that "there is no evidence!"

If sufficient evidence has been presented to warrant further investigation of an unusual phenomenon, argue that "evidence alone proves nothing!" Ignore the fact that preliminary evidence is not supposed to prove anything.

In any case, imply that proof precedes evidence. This will eliminate

the possibility of initiating any meaningful process of investigation--particularly if no criteria of proof have yet been

established for the phenomenon in question.

Insist that criteria of proof cannot possibly be established for phenomena that do not exist.

Although science is not supposed to tolerate vague or double standards, always insist that unconventional phenomena must be judged

by a separate, yet ill-defined, set of scientific rules. Do this by

declaring that "extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence"--

but take care never to define where the "ordinary" ends and the "extraordinary" begins. This will allow you to manufacture an infinitely receding evidential horizon; i.e., to define "extraordinary" evidence as that which lies just out of reach at any point in time.

In the same manner, insist on classes of evidence that are impossible

to obtain. For example, declare that unidentified aerial phenomena may

be considered real only if we can bring them into laboratories to

strike them with hammers and analyze their physical properties. Disregard the accomplishments of the inferential sciences--astronomy,

for example, which gets on just fine without bringing actual planets,

stars, galaxies and black holes into its labs and striking them with

hammers.

Practice debunkery-by-association. Lump together all phenomena popularly deemed paranormal and suggest that their proponents and

researchers speak with a single voice. In this way you can indiscriminately drag material across disciplinary lines or from one

case to another to support your views as needed. For example, if a

claim having some superficial similarity to the one at hand has been

(or is popularly assumed to have been) exposed as fraudulent, cite it

as if it were an appropriate example. Then put on a gloating smile,

lean back in your armchair and just say "I rest my case".

Use the word "imagination" as an epithet that applies only to seeing

what's not there, and not to denying what is there.

If a significant number of people agree that they have observed something that violates the consensus reality, simply ascribe it to

"mass hallucination". Avoid addressing the possibility that the consensus reality might itself constitute a mass hallucination.

Ridicule, ridicule. It is far and away the single most

chillingly effective weapon in the war against discovery and innovation. Ridicule has the unique power to make people of virtually

any persuasion go completely unconscious in a twinkling. It fails to

sway only those few who are of sufficiently independent mind not to

buy into the kind of emotional consensus that ridicule provides.

By appropriate innuendo and example, imply that ridicule constitutes

an essential feature of the scientific method that can raise the level

of objectivity and dispassionateness with which any investigation is conducted.

If pressed about your novel interpretations of the scientific method,

declare that "intellectual integrity is a subtle issue".

Imply that investigators of the unorthodox are zealots. Suggest that

in order to investigate the existence of something one must first

believe in it absolutely. Then demand that all such "true believers"

know all the answers to their most puzzling questions in complete

detail ahead of time. Convince people of your own sincerity by reassuring them that you yourself would "love to believe in these

fantastic phenomena". Carefully sidestep the fact that science is not

about believing or disbelieving, but about finding out.

Use "smoke and mirrors", i.e., obfuscation and illusion. Never forget

that a slippery mixture of fact, opinion, innuendo, out-of-context

information and outright lies will fool most of the people most of the

time. As little as one part fact to ten parts b***t will usually do

the trick. (Some veteran debunkers use homeopathic dilutions of fact

with remarkable success!) Cultivate the art of slipping back and forth

between fact and fiction so undetectably that the flimsiest foundation

of truth will always appear to firmly support your entire edifice of opinion.

Employ "TCP": Technically Correct Pseudo-refutation. Example: if

someone remarks that all great truths began as blasphemies, respond

immediately that not all blasphemies have become great truths. Because

your response was technically correct, no one will notice that it did

not really refute the original remark.

Trivialize the case by trivializing the entire field in question.

Characterize the study of orthodox phenomena as deep and time-consuming, while deeming that of unorthodox phenomena so insubstantial as to demand nothing more than a scan of the tabloids.

If pressed on this, simply say "but there's nothing there to study!"

Characterize any serious investigator of the unorthodox as a "buff" or

"freak", or as "self-styled"-- the media's favorite code-word for "bogus".

Remember that most people do not have sufficient time or expertise for

careful discrimination, and tend to accept or reject the whole of an

unfamiliar situation. So discredit the whole story by attempting to

discredit part of the story. Here's how: a) take one element of

completely out of context; b) find something prosaic that hypothetically could explain it; c) declare therefore that that one

element has been explained; d) call a press conference and announce to

the world that the entire case has been explained!

Engage the services of a professional stage magician who can mimic the

phenomenon in question; for example, ESP, psychokinesis or levitation.

This will convince the public that the original claimants or witnesses

to such phenomena must themselves have been (or been fooled by) talented stage magicians who hoaxed the original phenomenon in precisely the same way.

Find a prosaic phenomenon that, to the uninitiated, resembles the

claimed phenomenon. Then suggest that the existence of the commonplace

look-alike somehow forbids the existence of the genuine article. For

example, imply that since people often see "faces" in rocks and