

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-ma
il
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 familiar 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.

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 scientific authority.

Portray science not as an open-ended process of discovery but as a 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 "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 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, 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 a case 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