

False Equivalencies and the Mediocrity of Nonlocal Consciousness Research Criticism

| Stephan A. Schwartz |

The first time I encountered denialism was in 1981, at the annual meeting of the Parapsychological Association. I was sitting at a table with several people, talking about the magician Randi's attacks on Hal Puthoff, Russell Targ, and Ed May, the three physicists running the government-funded Stanford Research Institute's remote-viewing program. As we sat there talking, who should come over but Randi himself. He could not be mistaken. He sported massive white gray fluffy muttonchop burn-sides, not seen since the 19th century, and a matching beard. His shirt was Robin's egg blue, his suit almost white. It was all very studied. Although different in style, looking back on it, the effect was something like David Suchet as Hercule Poirot.

Without preamble, Randi began by asking about my submarine experiment, Deep Quest, an experiment I had done a few years earlier, one that used remote viewing to locate an unknown wreck deep in the ocean on the seafloor and to establish that the nonlocal perception used in remote viewing is not electromagnetic. I began very earnestly to answer his question but realized he wasn't really interested, so I stopped. After a beat, he turned and asked the table what we thought of Hal and Russell. Several people made noncommittal remarks. He pivoted to me saying, "What do you think, Stephan?"

His body language said "this is what I am interested in." It was all so odd I just looked at him and, in that moment, noticed a winking tiny red light in the side pocket of his jacket. He saw me seeing it and pulled his jacket closed, which made his pocket gape, revealing a tape recorder. I was stunned to realize that we were being secretly recorded. I reached in his pocket and pulled it out. "What a nice machine," I said, pressing the buttons to make the tape rewind. When it got to the beginning and stopped I pressed record and began to talk about the machine intermittently saying "testing, one . . . two . . . three" until I thought I had gone about as long as he had been sitting there. Then, hit the play key to see that it had recorded my overdub. As this was happening, Randi was verbally tap dancing. "Oh, the switch is touchy. I wonder how that happened. I just got it." Looking around the faces at the table, he could see no one believed this. When I gave him back the tape recorder, he got up and left without a word.

My overwhelming sense of the experience was its theatrical shoddiness and lack of ethics. I didn't know much about "professional skeptics," but it was hard for me to believe anyone could take Randi seriously. Yet I had been hearing about him for years and knew people did. That sense of puzzlement over the mediocrity of denier criticism, yet the media's and even much of science's acceptance of it, has stayed with me ever since and been frequently reinforced by other examples. A couple of recent events have compelled me to think about the enduring mediocrity of denier criticism and the issue of false equivalences.

Recently on television I saw a pundit who had never been in the armed services, let alone combat, critique the observations about Afghanistan made by Colonel Jack Jacobs, a seasoned veteran and combat leader in the Vietnam War who was awarded the Medal of Honor. That's a false equivalency. American media treat everything from political to scientific developments like a boxing match or a football game. A contact sport in which two warriors or two teams clash, and only one is left standing. So almost every interaction on a cable news talk show juxtaposes opposing points of view.

As you have witnessed yourself, this results in absurd exchanges: a climate change denier Senator, who clearly has no idea what he is talking about, will be interviewed and treated as equally knowledgeable in a debate with a geophysicist who has spent the last 30 years researching the climate. It makes for ratings generating *mano-mano*, but it is intellectually bankrupt.

This sports battle format used by the media is fully understood by deniers, be they antievolutionists, climate-change deniers, or consciousness deniers. It is one of their principal polemic tools used to create confusion and unclarity. The viewer, the reader, or the policy maker, is left not knowing what the real facts are.

In September 2012, The Union of Concerned Scientists issued a study that makes this point very clearly by looking at climate change. The Union spent 6 months studying news media and reported Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page were notable for the appalling misinformation concerning climate change that they routinely disperse. Between February

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to July 2012, they found that 93% of Fox News' statements on the climate were factual compromised and misleading. The *Journal's* editorial page was only marginally better, with 81% of their climate coverage from August 2011 to July 2012 identified as "misleading."¹

"[Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal*] both were staggering in the levels of misleading information about climate science," Brenda Ekwurzel, a climate scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists, told *Raw Story*. "We found that both Fox News and [*The Wall Street Journal*] opinion page have staggeringly high levels of misinformation."² This concerted denier misinformation campaign has had an effect.

There is a parallel to this in consciousness denierism. I am going to pick three examples. I could add a dozen more, but let these three stand for the whole, and each illustrates a different aspect of the mediocrity of nonlocal consciousness research denierism.

Let's start in 1975 with a particularly notorious example. It will also serve to explain the difference between a skeptic and a denier. And you can judge their relative qualities for yourself. Astronomer Dennis Rawlins, already famous for debunking the claims of polar explorers Richard Byrd and Robert Peary and demonstrating that Ronald Amundsen was the first man to reach either pole, decided to join a team headed by philosopher Paul Kurtz (the founder of the Committee to Scientifically Investigate the Claims of the Paranormal [CSICOP]) to launch a frontal attack against presumptive "planetary influences" on human behavior. Also in this group were French investigators Michel and his wife (at the time) and research partner Françoise Gauquelin. Kurtz, and through him CSICOP, had two main ways of presenting themselves: a journal called *The Humanist*, which Kurtz edited, and a book publisher, Prometheus Books, which he founded.

Michel Gauquelin was a psychologist and statistician, and that was the foundation of his research. He used rigorous statistical tools to examine data in the context of astrological claims and scrupulously reported the results. He and his wife were skeptics, but they were driven by data, not belief. Over a series of publications covering several years, they reported

a small but statistically significant relationship between some planetary positions at the time of the birth and later outstanding performance, most notably the position of Mars in a natal chart and later athletic prowess.³⁻⁵

In 1978, Michel Gauquelin wrote a paper critical of astrology that was published in *The Humanist*.⁶ Out of the paper grew a book debunking traditional Western astrology's planetary effects, also written by Gauquelin.⁷ It was published in 1979 by Prometheus Books.

But it was that small effect that did stand up to testing that became intolerable to Kurtz and many in CSICOP. A kind of minor modern Galileo trial then occurred, including a threatened excommunication. Gauquelin was pressed to recant. He would not; being a genuine scientist the data would not let him. This refusal led *The Humanist* group to attack him, and they chose to focus their attack on the Gauquelins' statistics,⁸ but it soon became clear that Michel Gauquelin was the better statistician, and the denier case collapsed. Undeterred, the group went on for round two, which involved an attempted Committee-sponsored replication of the "Mars effect" and a dispute over the interpretation of the data.

Rawlins, whose reputation was based on debunking the inaccurate, was appalled. He describes what happened next as a comedy of incompetence, bombast, and a commitment to denierism so powerful it overturned good sense and ethics, until the deniers were thoroughly tarred by Rawlins (among others) for their unscientific disdain for experimental evidence and integrity.

After furious public exchanges, Rawlins publicly resigned from the group.⁹ Shortly thereafter, he put the entire sorry tale in the record via a paper entitled "sTar baby," a play on Joel Chandler Harris' late 19th-century Uncle Remus stories, where Br'er Rabbit, the Loki-like adventurer around whom many of the stories are built, attacks a tar baby and, each time he hits it he becomes more and more mired in the tar.⁸

Rawlins was not the only member of the CSICOP team repelled by what was being done. The former member who saw the skeptic denier distinction most clearly was the sociologist Marcello Truzzi, who acted on his beliefs by first resigning and then, founding a new journal, *The Zetetic Scholar*

(Zetetic from the Greek ζῆτῆτικός, from ζῆτεῖν to seek to proceed by inquiry) in which he decried what he called "pseudoskepticism."¹⁰

In speaking about the Gauquelin matter in 1982, Truzzi wrote:

The current evidence strongly indicates that (a) a Mars Correlation was validly found by the Gauquelins, (b) a correlation was found in several replications by the Gauquelins using different samples, (c) a similar correlation was found in replications conducted by Kurtz-Zelen-Abell (KZA) [in the CSICOP-sponsored research study]. In regard to (a) and (b) the key question concerns the validity of the Gauquelins' data. It has repeatedly been incorrectly stated that there is no way to check this data. Not only have the Gauquelins published all their data (so computations can easily be checked), they have kept all original records from the birth registries, and these have been made available to any serious researchers. In fact, the Gauquelins have urged critics to check this data.¹⁰

Later, when he was asked to say more about the events and his role, he defined what might be called the ethical skeptic's position:

Originally I was invited to be a co-chairman of CSICOP by Paul Kurtz. I helped to write the bylaws and edited their journal. I found myself attacked by the Committee members and board, who considered me to be too soft on the paranormalists. My position was not to treat protoscientists as adversaries, but to look to the best of them and ask them for their best scientific evidence. I found that the Committee was much more interested in attacking the most publicly visible claimants such as *The National Enquirer*. The major interest of the Committee was not inquiry but to serve as an advocacy body, a public relations group for scientific orthodoxy. The Committee has made many mistakes. My main objection to the Committee, and the reason I chose to leave it, was that it was taking the public position that it represented the scientific community, serving as gatekeepers on maverick claims, whereas I felt they were simply unqualified to act as judge and

jury when they were simply lawyers.¹¹

New Zealand psychologist Richard Kammann, the third person to resign, would write in his exegetic essay of the whole Gauquelin affair, “When the whole record is examined over five years, there is almost no instance in which merit wins out over self-serving bias.”¹² The one clear exception was providing Rawlins a carte blanche space in the CSICOP publication, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, and even this was undermined by a flurry of simultaneous misstatements.^{8,9}

In 1982, Kammann wrote:

The bottom line is that an apology is owed the Gauquelins for the mistreatment of their data, and the aspersions cast on their authenticity. I don’t wish to convey that I’m a believer, because I also have skeptical reservations about the Mars effect. What makes this claim suspect is the scientific perversity of the proposition that the location of Mars in the sky at the time a person is born has some effect on that person’s athletic performance 30 or 40 years later.¹²

More than a decade later Suitbert Ertel, a German researcher of the next generation, uninvolved with the bitter fight that had gone before, meticulously went back through this entire chapter of denierism (including a subsequent denier round in Paris, France) and confirmed by a variety of statistical analyses, both Kammann’s and Truzzi’s assessments.¹³ Perhaps even more important was the graceless acknowledgment of Paul Kurtz who had begun it all: “It is time, to submit, to move to other more productive topics.”¹⁴

Now let’s come forward to 2011. Cornell University psychology professor Daryl Bem carried out a behavioral response study that produced “evidence that our physiology can anticipate unpredictable erotic or negative stimuli before they occur.”¹⁵ He measured this through running a series of sessions, each about 20 minutes in length. Participants were told “. . . on each trial of the experiment, pictures of two curtains will appear on the screen side by side. One of them has a picture behind it; the other has a blank wall behind it. Your task is to click on the curtain that you feel has the picture be-

hind it. The curtain will then open, permitting you to see if you selected the correct curtain. There will be 36 trials in all.

Several of the pictures contain explicit erotic images (eg, couples engaged in non-violent but explicit consensual sexual acts). If you object to seeing such images, you should not participate in this experiment.”¹⁵

He published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2012. Bem’s study was not the first such study, or even one of the first dozen studies. But none before had been done by anyone of Bem’s stature. He was a national figure in psychology and a senior professor at an Ivy League University. The study got picked up by *The New York Times*, which said, “One of psychology’s most respected journals has agreed to publish a paper presenting what its author describes as strong evidence for extrasensory perception, the ability to sense future events.”¹⁶ A barrage of denier criticism ensued.

University of Amsterdam mathematical psychologist Eric-Jan Wagenmakers and his team were the principal attackers. As with the Gauquelin episode, they did so through Bem’s statistical analysis protocol, arguing that Bem should have used a Bayesian analytical approach, which would have made his positive effect disappear. In making their case, the Wagenmakers’ team particularly relied on the research of University of California, Irvine, Department of Statistics, mathematician and acknowledged Bayesian authority, Wesley Johnson.¹⁷

The Wagenmakers et al paper elicited a published commentary from Bem, *with Wesley Johnson as co-author*, along with Jessica Utts, also in the department at University of California Irvine. The crux of the Bem, Johnson, and Utts response: the denier arguments were based on an inaccurate and inappropriate interpretation of *Johnson’s work*.¹⁸

And, finally, I want to take an example from the near-death experience research.

In August 2102, neuroscientist Dean Mobbs, of the British Medical Research Council, Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, and Edinburgh University Senior Lecturer Caroline Watt published a paper in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, “There is nothing paranormal about near-death experiences: how neuroscience can explain seeing bright lights, meeting the dead, or

being convinced you are one of them.” In the paper they presented an argument that concluded:

Taken together, the scientific evidence suggests that all aspects of the near-death experience have a neurophysiological or psychological basis: the vivid pleasure frequently experienced in near-death experiences may be the result of fear-elicited opioid release, while the life review and REM components of the near-death experience could be attributed to the action of the locus coeruleus-noradrenaline system. Out-of-body experiences and feelings of disconnection with the physical body could arise because of a break-down in multisensory processes, and the bright lights and tunneling could be the result of a peripheral to fovea break-down of the visual system through oxygen deprivation. A priori expectations, where the individual makes sense of the situation by believing they will experience the archetypal near-death experience package, may also play a crucial role.¹⁹

In response to this, two internationally prominent physicians and NDE researchers, Bruce Greyson, the Chester F. Carlson Professor of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences, and Director of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia Medical School, and Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel, were moved to write a response, also published in *Trends*. They began by noting that Caroline Watt, “acknowledged that they (she and Mobb) had avoided looking at any evidence for veridical out of body perception, resulting in their being unable to evaluate whether or not there was empirical evidence of anything paranormal about NDEs.”²⁰

And they were correct. Indeed, Watt made just such an admission in an interview with Alex Tsakiris on his radio program, *Skeptico*, which specializes in interviewing scientists doing consciousness research. It produced this exchange:

Alex Tsakiris: I’m saying your paper got traction even though there’s not a lot behind it. I’m saying you cited references incorrectly. And you referenced to skeptics like Dr Susan Blackmore, who admits to not being current in the field.

Dr Caroline Watt: As I said, it was intended to be a provocative piece. It's not claiming to be balanced. The paper, if it wasn't limited to two or three pages, I could have dealt more thoroughly with many different aspects because there's more to near-death experiences than the dying brain hypothesis. It would have been a longer and more in-depth paper, but that wasn't the paper that we wrote.²¹

Greyson et al, in their response to the Mobbs' and Watt's paper, noted that "[T]he near-death literature of the past four decades has moved beyond collection of anecdotes into rigorous scientific investigation. That investigation rightfully has included, and should continue to include, research into neurophysiological correlates of NDEs."²²

Then, they got to the nub of the denier/skeptic argument—that the debate has become a false equivalency. Scholars who propose materialist explanations, they said, “need to respond to all relevant data, not just data supporting the a priori assumption that NDEs must be reducible to known neurophysiology” (emphasis added). In suggesting that there may be some evidence of paranormal features in NDEs, we are not suggesting that those features are supernatural or beyond scientific investigation. They may be paranormal in the sense of being difficult to explain in terms of the currently prevailing reductionistic framework.²²

Mobbs, by himself, replied to this in a manner that is a classic illustration of the process of oncoming paradigm crisis described by Princeton Center for Advance Studies physicist and historian and philosopher Thomas Kuhn in his classic work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Mobbs first made an attempt to extend the materialist paradigm, “The valid conclusion propounded by Greyson and colleagues is that ‘[NDEs] should be studied by scientific methods, rather than dismissed without investigation,’ a conclusion that mirrors ours. Greyson and colleagues are to be congratulated for their highly respected research in documenting these experiences, yet in my view they, and others, have not provided any compelling evidence concerning NDEs that contradicts what we already know about the brain.”²³

Greyson et al, also point out that “[NDEs] may be paranormal in the sense of being difficult to explain in terms of the currently prevailing reductionist framework.” The use of the word “paranormal” in this context, however, is misleading. Indeed, they are using “paranormal” in a nonstandard way, whereas the standard understanding of the term is to mean “*phenomena beyond scientific investigation*” (emphasis added).

Science is by nature narrow and rigid, as it should be because the vast bulk of research could be practiced in no other way. However, normal science, as Kuhn defined it, always produces anomalies in the course of its work.²² As it proceeds inevitably to reach its boundaries, the encounters with anomalies increases. Normal science, however, abhors anomalies because they are not tailored to the scheme by which it defines the universe. At first, then, anomalies are ignored on the assumption that subsequent normal science research will deal with them when either instrumentation or theory articulation or both are improved. If this does not happen, an attempt is made to extend the endangered theory in the hope that an extension of the paradigm's accepted propositions will bring the anomalies back into the fold.

In the beginning of a paradigm's lifespan, better instrumentation or theory extension does eliminate most of the anomalies by making them conform; some, however, will not conform, no matter how artful the experiment or ingenious the development of the original premise. Most scientists are happy to leave these anomalies in a state of limbo, which is why parapsychology is both science and non-science at one and the same time. Everyone knows anomalies are out there, lurking on the edges of the paradigm like hungry beasts around a campfire. But scientists assume, mostly correctly, that the majority of problems can still be contained within the paradigm, and so, for a time at least, normal science continues, and the paradigm provides a reasonably secure framework.

However, as normal-science research continues to get closer to the edge of the “known,” it pushes so intensely and with such specific focus that its explorations produce just the opposite effect from that desired. Not only does such research fail

to strengthen the paradigm, which was its original purpose, but it produces still more anomalies. Ironically, at the end of the paradigm's lifespan, the better the instrumentation the more intractable the challenge presented by anomalies. When this happens, the science enters a state of crisis from which there is no turning back. This is the phase we are now entering, and why a nonfact based Denier movement has arisen.

In *Science, God, and the Nature of Reality: Bias in Biomedical Research*, biomedical scientist Professor Sarah S. Knox of the University of West Virginia Medical School frames this issue very clearly:

Since [critics contend] there is no plausible mechanism within a materialist frame of reference to explain them, paranormal phenomena can't possibly be valid. This is the same reasoning that the learned men of Galileo's day used when they refused to look in the telescope. This attitude is nowhere more evident than in the number of scientists who are willing to volunteer as “expert” commentators on television programs about paranormal phenomena, astonishingly undeterred and unembarrassed by their complete lack of knowledge concerning the existing experimental data. These “experts” smile condescendingly as they explain that the phenomena under discussion can be explained by chance occurrence, brain abnormality, etc., depending on the topic at hand. Since the belief that causality can only be found in matter reigns supreme, there doesn't seem to be any requirement that these “experts” support their claims with actual data. They need only introduce the possibility that the same outcome might have been achieved through some other means, to convince their naïve audience that it is all ‘hocus pocus.’²⁴

As the British Society for Psychical Research puts it, opposition to this area of research is “often against its implications and not the quality of its evidence.”²⁵

It is long past time that we recognize that just as with climate change, and evolution denierism, the quality of the criticism aimed at nonlocal consciousness research is in false equivalency to the research itself.

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