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Between Forteana and Skepticism

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Sometimes, when it is hard to review a book, it is tempting to turn in some kind of personal reflection, one demonstrates why the reviewer felt disconnected from the text they were reviewing. This review of Bernard N. Wills *Believing Weird Things* - which I received three months ago, and have spent quite a bit of time thinking about in the interim - is just such a review-cum-reflection, because I am not sure what this book is about, nor who its intended audience is.

According to the blurb on the back *Believing Weird Things* is a response to Michael Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things* (Henry Holt and Company, 1997). Shermer's book is one I know all too well, having read and reread it when I started work on my PhD. At the time the book was less than ten years old, and Shermer and his cohort of Skeptics (spelt with a 'K' to denote that particular brand of sceptical thought popular among (largely) non-philosophers in the U.S.) were considered to be the first and final word on the rationality (more properly, the supposed irrationality) of belief in conspiracy theories.

Given I was working on a dissertation on the topic, getting to grips with the arguments against belief in such theories seemed crucial, especially given my long and sustained interest in the what you might call the contra-philosophy of Skepticism, the work of Charles Fort.

Times for the Fortean

Fort (who Wills mentions in passing) was a cantankerous collector and publisher of strange and inconvenient phenomena. His *Book of the Damned* (Boni and Liveright, 1919) is an early 20th Century litany of things which seemed to fall outside the systemic study of the world. From rains of frogs, to cities floating in the sky, Fort presented the strange and the wonderful, often without comment. When he did dare to theorise about the phenomena he cataloged, he often contradicted his previous theories in favour of new ones. Scholars of Fort think his lack of a system was quite deliberate: Fort's damned data was *meant* to be immune to scientific study.

Fort was hardly a known figure in his day, but his work has gained fans and adherents, who call themselves Forteans and engage in the study of Forteana. Forteans collect and share damned data, from haunted physics laboratories, to falls of angel hair. Often they theorise about what might cause these phenomena, but they also often don't dispute other interpretations of the same 'damned data.'

John Keel, one of the U.S.'s most famous Forteans (and who, if he did not invent the term 'Men in Black' at least popularised their existence), had a multitude of theories about the origin of UFOs and monsters in the backwoods of the U.S., which he liberally sprinkled throughout his works. If you challenged Keel on what you thought was an inconsistency of thought he would brush it off (or get angry at the suggestion he was meant to consistent in the first place).

I was a fan of Forteana without being a Fortean: I fail the Fortean test of tolerating competing hypotheses, preferring to stipulate terms whilst encouraging others to join my

side of the debate. But I love reading Forteana (it is a great source of examples for the social epistemologist), and thinking about alternative interpretations. So, whilst I do not think UAP (unexpected aerial phenomena - the new term for UFO) are creatures from another dimension, I do like thinking about the assumptions which drive such theories.

Note here that I say 'theories' quite deliberately: any student of Forteana will quickly become aware that modern Forteans (contra Fort himself) are typically very systematic about their beliefs. It is just that often the Fortean is happy to be a systemic pluralist, happily accepting competing or complimentary systems as equally possible.

Weird and Weirder

Which brings me back to *Believing Weird Things*. The first section concerns beliefs people like Shermer might find weird but Wills argues are reasonable in the context under which they developed. Wills' interest here is wide, taking in astrology, fairies, and why he is not a Rastafarian. Along the way he contextualises those supposedly weird beliefs and shows how, at certain times or in certain places, they were the product of a systemic study of the world.

Wills points out that a fault of Skepticism is a lack of appreciation for history: often what we now consider rational was once flimflam (plate tectonics), and what was systemic and rational (astrology) is today's quackery. As Wills writes:

The Ancients do not seem to me to be thinking badly so much as thinking in an alien context and under different assumptions that are too basic to admit evaluation in the ordinary empirical sense (which is not to say they admit of no evaluation whatsoever). Further, there are many things in Aristotle and the *Hebrew Bible* which strike me as true even though the question of 'testing' them scientifically and 'skeptically' is pretty much meaningless. In short, the weird beliefs I study are at minimum intelligible, sometimes plausible and occasionally true. [4]

Indeed, the very idea which underpins Shermer's account, 'magical thinking,' seems to fail the skeptical test: why, like Shermer, would you think it is some hardwired function rather than culturally situated? But more importantly, how is magical thinking any different from any other kind of thinking?

This last point is important because, as others have argued (including myself) many beliefs people think are problematic are, when looked at in context with other beliefs, either not particularly problematic, or no more problematic than the beliefs we *assume* are produced rationally. The Psychology of Religion back in the early 20th Century is a good example of this: when psychologists worried about religious belief started looking at the similarities in belief formation between the religious and the non-religious, they started to find the same kind of 'errors' in irreligious people as well.

In the same respect, the work in social psychology on belief in conspiracy theories seems to be suffering the same kind of problem today: it's not clear that conspiracy theorists are any less (or more) rational than the rest of us. Rather, often what marks out the difference in belief are the different assumptions about how the world is, or how it works. Indeed, as

Wills writes:

Many weird ideas are only weird from a certain assumed perspective. This is important because this assumed perspective is often one of epistemic and social privilege. We tend to associate weird ideas with weird people we look down upon from some place of superior social status. [10]

The first section of *Believing Weird Things* is, then, possibly the best defence of a kind of Fortean philosophy one could hope for. Yet that is also an unfair judgement, because thinking of *Believing Weird Things* as a Fortean text is just my imposition: Fort is mentioned exactly once, and only in a footnote. I am only calling this a tentatively Fortean text because I am not sure who the book's audience is. Ostensibly - at least according to the blurb - it is meant to be a direct reply to Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things*. But if it is, then it is twenty years late: *Why People Believe Weird Things* was published in 1997.

Not just that, but whilst *Believing Weird Things* deals with a set of interesting issues Shermer did not cover (yet ought to have), almost everything which makes up the reply to *Why People Believe Weird Things* is to be found in the *Introduction* alone. Now, I'd happily set the *Introduction* as a reading in a Critical Thinking class or elementary Epistemology class. However, I could not see much use in setting the book as a whole.

What's Normal Anyway?

Which brings us to the second half of *Believing Weird Things*. Having set out why some weird beliefs are not that weird when thought about in context, Wills sets out his reasons for thinking that beliefs which aren't – in some sense – considered weird ought to be. The choice of topics here is interesting, covering Islamophobia, white privilege, violence and the proper attitude towards tolerance and toleration in our polities.

But it invites the question (again) of who his intended audience is meant to be? For example, I also think Islamophobia, racism, and violence are deeply weird, and it worries me that some people still think they are sensible responses. But if Wills is setting out to persuade the other half of the debate, the racists, the bigots, and the fans of violence, then I do not think he will have much luck, as his discussions never seem to get much further than "Here are my reckons!"

And some of those reckons really need more arguments in favour of them.

For example, Wills brings out the old canard that religious beliefs and scientific beliefs are one and the same (presented as 'religious faith' and 'scientific faith'). Not just that, but, in chapter 6, he talks about the things 'discovered' by religion. These are presented as being *en par* with discoveries in the sciences. Yet aren't the things discovered by religion ('humans beings must suffer before they learn. ... existence is suffering' [48]) really the 'discoveries' of, say, philosophers working in a religious system? And aren't many of these discoveries just stipulations, or religious edicts?

This issue is compounded by Wills specification that the process of discovery for religious faith is hermeneutics: the interpretation of religious texts. But that invites even more questions: if you think the gods are responsible for both the world and certain texts in the world you could imagine hermeneutic inquiry to be somehow equivalent to scientific inquiry, but if you are either doubtful of the gods, or doubtful about the integrity of the gods' prophets, then there is much room to doubt there is much of a connection at all between 'faith' in science and faith in scripture.

Another example: in chapter 8, Wills states:

Flat-Earthers are one thing but Birthers, say, are quite another: some ideas do not come from a good place and are not just absurd but pernicious. [67]

Now, there is an argument to be had about the merits (or lack thereof) of the Flat Earth theory and the thesis Barack Obama was not born in the U.S. Some might even claim that the Flat Earth theory is worse, given that belief might entail thinking a lot of very disparate institutions, located globally, are in on a massive cover-up. The idea Barack Obama is secretly Kenyan has little effect on those of us outside the U.S. electoral system.

None of this is to say there aren't decent arguments to be had about these topics. It is, instead, to say that often these positions are stipulated. As such, the audience for *Believing Weird Things* seems to be people who agree with Wills, rather than an attempt by Wills to change hearts and minds.

How to Engage With Weird Beliefs

Which is not to say that the second half of the book lacks merit; it just lacks meat. The chapters on Islamophobia (chapter 8) and racism (chapter 9) are good: the contextualisation of both Islamophobia and the nature of conflicts in the Middle East are well expressed. But they are not particularly novel (especially if you read the work of left-wing commentators). But even if the chapters are agreeable to someone of a left-wing persuasion, all too often the chapters just end: the chapter on violence (chapter 10), for example, has no clear conclusion other than that violence is bad.

Similarly confused is the chapter on tolerance (chapter 11). But the worst offender is the chapter on the death of Conservatism (chapter 14). This could have been an interesting argument about the present state of today's politics. But the chapter ends abruptly, and with it, the book. There is no conclusion, no tying together of threads. There's hardly even any mention of Shermer or skepticism in the second half of *Believing Weird Things*.

Which brings us back to the question: who is this book for? If the book were just the first half it could be seen as both a reply to Shermer and a hesitant stab at a Fortean philosophy. But the second half of the book comes across more as the author's rumination on some pertinent social issues of the day, and none of that content seems to advance far beyond 'Here are my thoughts...'

Which, unfortunately, is also the character of this review: in trying to work out who the book is for I find my thoughts as inconclusive as the text itself. None of this is to say that *Believing Weird Things* is a bad or terrible book. Rather, it is just a collection of the author's ruminations. So, unless you happen to be a fan of Wills, there is little to this text which substantially advances the debate over belief in anything.

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