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Belief in a Weird World

Adam Riggio, Royal Crown College

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Weird is a strange word. The idea of weirdness itself is rather strange, as suits the subject I suppose. Bernard Wills has written the essay anthology *Believing Weird Things*, in part, to explore what weirdness is. The book itself, however, is rather weird. Or at least, it's weird to an academic audience.

Let me explain. While I write quite a few book reviews for SERRC, over the last while, the amount of time between my receiving a review copy and actually writing and submitting the review of the book has lengthened from a flexible to a messianic duration. So my reviews often end up being informed by other reviews of the same book, where others have gotten around to it before me.

So this review is also, though in small part, a rebuke to Matthew Dentith's earlier review of *Believing Weird Things* published late last year.¹ Although it remains far from perfect, Wills has written a book that is both challenging and accessible to a wide audience. *Believing Weird Things* is a popular book of philosophical thought, in the tradition of Bertrand Russell's public philosophical essays. For some audiences of researchers, a book of that character may be too weird to understand at first.

What Is Weird? The Weird? Weirdness?

Whether something is weird is not a matter purely of ontology. There is no weird in itself, since weirdness is a relational property. Something is weird only in comparison to something else, relative to surroundings, wider environments, or the expectations of people regarding those surroundings and environment.

Weirdness is most fundamentally an epistemological concern. When a sudden disturbance appears in the smooth flowing of a natural process, that disturbance is simply disruptive and destructive. We as self-conscious observers may call it weird, but regarding the process and its disruption in themselves, there are matters of fact alone.

Science-fiction and horror literature has probed the nature of weirdness in more nuance than many philosophical arguments. The weird unsettles expectation, which creates an immediate fear and a profound fear. Speaking immediately, a weird encounter is a sign that presumptions about the reliability of the world to sustain your own life are in doubt. That causes fear for your life.

The more profound fear of the weird inspires is that, more than just your life being at risk, the fundamental nature of reality is at risk. It would be extremely dangerous to encounter creatures like the Shoggoths of Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness," one of the stories that helped forge the genre of weird fiction, but their nature is weird enough such an encounter would call into doubt everything you believed about reality itself.

¹ Okay, that makes me sound way, way too late.

To be weird is to have a character or nature that is such an anomaly for your expectations of how and what the world is, as to be unnerving. A natural process cannot be unnerved, only a self-conscious subjectivity. What is, is; what is weird must be understood as weird.

Weirdness, therefore, is in the eye of the beholder. At least that's what I would say if I were disposed to cheap clichés. Different people with different histories, cultures, moral and aesthetic values will consider different things weird.

The Relative Relativity of Weirdness

Wills himself describes it well in his essay on Rastafarian religious beliefs, one of the best in the volume. Rastafarianism is a Caribbean religious minority, its people marginalized in the faith's Jamaican birthplace. The religion's cultural influence far outshines its size because of the global fame and historical influence of Rastafarian musicians in reggae, such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Lee Scratch Perry.

But to someone raised in a generally Christian culture, some Rastafarian beliefs are genuinely strange, even though much of the religion is a clear outgrowth of the Abrahamic tradition. The Rastafarian Jah is the same God as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Rastafarianism recasts the Jewish concept of the chosen people to refer to all Africans who suffered from colonization and the Atlantic slave trade, their Exodus being the ongoing process of decolonization. Like Islam, the moral principles of the religion incorporate rituals of worship into everyday social life, and it roots those moral principles in the shape of world history.

Rastafarian parallels with Christianity are, as Wills and I agree, rather weird. Rastafarianism has a Messiah figure that operates according to the same metaphysical principles as Christ. Haile Selassie I, Ethiopian Emperor from 1930 to 1974, is the living incarnation of God for Rastafarians.

I use the present tense because Rastafarians hold that Selassie is alive in some form, despite his 1974 assassination in Ethiopia's communist uprising. In all seriousness, I expect there eventually to be a theological schism in Rastafarianism over how to reconcile their faith with the fact that Selassie was murdered and his body stuffed under the toilets of a palace bathroom, discovered decades later, long after that palace had been converted into government offices.

I can talk about this with an air of humour, as though I'm joking from a position of relative privilege at the expense of Rastafarianism and Rastas. The detachment that allows me to dehumanize Rastafarian culture with this smirking bemusement is rooted in my attitude toward the faith: it is alien, a culture I know only through song lyrics and cultural stereotypes. I find the Rastafarian faith's messianism weird, but only because I was not raised a Rasta or near any Rastafarian communities.

In Wills' best essays, he uses these extended philosophical case studies to uncover the epistemic, political, and moral implications of who considers what weird, and why.

A Disjointed Path to Its End

The only real problem I have with the book is that not all of its essays are as good as its best. If I can use terms that more often describe albums, *Believing Weird Things* is a little front-loaded. The book is divided roughly in half. The first essays explore weird ideas and beliefs as a philosophical historian building a book of fascinating case studies. The second half of the book describes different ways in which weirdness has been weaponized, how difference and strangeness become no longer guides to fascinating places, but targets to be destroyed.

If I can take a couple of examples to illustrate what I mean, consider this. The best essay in the first half of *Believing Weird Things* is “Why I Am Not a Rastaman.” The best essay in the book’s second half is “Portrait of an Islamophobe.”

Yet I don’t want to linger too long on praise for the actual best essay in the volume, where Wills insightfully and incisively identifies the dynamics of racist discourse that show how Islamophobic ideology merges the dehumanization of colonial racism with the paranoia and massification of classical European anti-Semitism.

That’s all I really need to say other than that “Portrait of an Islamophobe” alone is ethically worth your buying *Believing Weird Things* at its affordable price, expressly for the purpose of rewarding Wills with one more purchase in his next royalty payment.

So when my biggest critique of a book is that some essays aren’t as good as others in an essay collection, you can be pretty sure that I don’t have a significant problem with what he’s doing. *Believing Weird Things* ends with two essays that originally appeared in earlier forms at SERRC, two analyses of the nationalist turn in Western conservatism.

Those essays offered quality insights on the true nature of conservatism as a tradition of English political philosophy whose classical works were the landmarks of Thomas Hobbes and Edmund Burke, and how the nationalism that dominates today’s right wing itself betrays many of the principles of those great thinkers.

However, they make for an odd fit with the other essays of the book, all of which explicitly experiment with our concept of the weird to develop a new philosophical insight. These last two essays are fine in themselves, but as they appear in *Believing Weird Things*, they amount to filler tracks that stand apart from the main themes and style of the book.

Misunderstanding the Will to Weirdness

My last point is a soft rebuttal to Matthew Dentith’s earlier review of *Believing Weird Things*. I couldn’t help but find Dentith’s critiques a little off the mark, since they were rooted in a conception of the weird that Wills didn’t share. This conception of the weird is rooted in Forteanism, the study and archiving of generally weird and strange phenomena, rumours, objects, folklore.

There are two central organizing concepts in the work of Charles Fort, as he first developed his project and how it has continued since. They are anti-systematicity and skepticism of skepticism. Fortean catalogues of weird things and events make no attempt to understand these departures from the norm as expressions of some underlying order. This is anti-systematicity, which parallels skepticism of skepticism, the refusal to doubt that something exists or occurred merely because its existence contradicts or is contrary to established knowledge.

Any system of knowledge based on these principles of anti-systematicity and skepticism of skepticism will regularly produce weirdnesses, because if you hold them, you will accept without much trouble radical departures inductively valid expectations about what is and is not possible. But these principles do not exhaustively define what is weird or what weird is. Fortean epistemology is openness to the weird, but does not itself define that which is weird. Dentith's analysis of Wills' work conflates the two.

But Dentith's error is a learning opportunity for us in who the best audience for *Believing Weird Things* would be. Dentith's misinterpretation flowed from his prior experience in academic research. Earlier in his career, the study of Fortean and the works of Michael Shermer, particularly his 1997 *Why People Believe Weird Things*.

In the introduction, Wills frames his own *Believing Weird Things* as a response to Shermer's arguments from the end of the last century. Dentith critiques Wills for having chosen an apparent interlocutor from more than 20 years ago, seeing this as an attempt to restore Shermer's ideas to a place in contemporary philosophical debates in the spheres of academic publication. But Wills never justifies such a restoration in his own book. Indeed, Wills never refers to Shermer in as much detail in the rest of the book as he does in the introduction.

Such a use of Shermer appears sloppy, and I do think Wills should have been a little more explicit in explaining the role that Shermer's work plays in his own thinking. A figure who plays such a major role in an introduction, but disappears throughout the main body of the book makes for poor academic writing.

But Wills' only mistake here was having given Dentith the opportunity to make his own mistake. Wills does not aim to restore Shermer to some more prestigious position in academic philosophical debates. Engaging with Shermer's ideas has a more personal meaning for Wills, because a chance encounter with Shermer's work was the inspiration for a trilogy of books that explore the nature of weirdness, of which *Believing Weird Things* is the second.

Wills refers to the work as Shermer to invoke him as an inspiration for his in-progress trilogy. Invoking an intellectual ancestor is not a reason that can inspire most academic writing, especially that based in paywalled research journals. Dentith did not understand this aspect of *Believing Weird Things* because he kept his analysis inside the context of the academician's writing.

Conclusion: Life Is Weird

Bernard Wills has written a book for a general thinking audience, a contribution to the social and ethical antidotes to rouse the red-pilled from their dogmatic slumbers. *Believing Weird Things* asks readers to re-evaluate what they consider reasonable and strange, that weirdness is a category without a simple definition or clear boundaries.

Contact details: serrc.digital@gmail.com

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