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“A Pyrrhonist Reply to a Fortrean Review”

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The *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* has asked me to respond to a review of my book *Believing Weird Things* (2018) putting me in the awkward position of having to comment on something to which I am inherently partial. Matthew Dentith (2019), the reviewer, has general queries and specific complaints and, in Part 1, I will begin with the former. I will address some of Dentith's specific criticisms in Part 2 of this piece.

Part 1

Audience and Opinion Influencers

Who, Dentith wonders, is the book for? The answer? Just anyone I suppose. I have no particular academic audience in mind and am perfectly happy to address the problems and concerns of intelligent readers at large in a way I hope is accessible and reasonably informative. He also wonders about my use of the Michael Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things* (1997) which is, as he points out, not a recent publication. I have two reasons, or rather excuses, for this.

In my previous book *Why Believe* (2015) I addressed recent popular philosophers on belief and frankly no longer felt like picking over the remains of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Shermer's book is a much more urbane foil to my own thoughts on the subject of belief and seems, frankly, to come from a more civilized (pre-9/11) era. It is, moreover, a widely disseminated and widely praised book and I have no doubt many people in the 'skeptical' community regard it as exemplary in its kind. Plus, I have no problem admitting the role of happenstance in my choice of authors: I simply happened upon the book and it set me thinking.¹

More importantly though, even now Shermer addresses and influences an audience neither Dentith nor I could ever reach. He gives TED talks for instance where he still addresses audiences with the same ideas expressed in his book. He can and still does speak from such platforms as *Scientific American*. So, I think the academic convention of commenting on last year's iteration of whatever you are commenting on does not apply in the popular sphere. To be brief, Shermer's views are baked into a significant segment of the culture and he continues to reap the rewards of disseminating them widely. Plus, the ideas he disseminates seem to me wrong not just philosophically (which I can live with) but socially and politically. They are not the ordinary philosophical issues about which we can have a polite discussion but fundamental questions about who makes the rules and who gets to speak.

Indeed, such writers can exert an almost cult like influence. I have spoken, for instance, to ex-fundamentalists liberated from fundamentalism by reading Sam Harris. The interesting thing was that they were not liberated at all. They repeated Harris' arguments and assertions

¹ Well I suppose what set me thinking most was J.H. Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1992) which explained the nature and pervasiveness of informal modes of reasoning and inference. This book is an early (19th Century) attack on the notion that reason is the application of method and still quite a good one. Certainly, the kind of views Newman so effectively criticized are still staples of the TED talk circuit and other popular media for disseminating ideas. Shermer seemed to me a perfect illustration of *exactly* what the English cardinal was talking about.

as holy writ and would engage with no other ideas and no other authors. One can change one's ideological stripes without changing one's underlying personality in the least. I dub this phenomenon 'cheap conversion'. I suspect these former fundamentalists are common in the Skeptic community as these two ideologies have a parasitic relationship with each other. These 'fan-boys' (always boys) are attaching themselves to an aura surrounding an intellectual celebrity, as many people do with Jordan Peterson.² He was not an intellectual except vicariously through a perceived 'smart person': a patron saint or tutelary spirit as it were.

The Harrises of this world trade in the impression that complex questions in philosophy and politics are the work of an afternoon for such as they and can be quickly mastered by their readers who can then hector and proselytize actual academic experts on the internet. This of course is one result of scientism. These men have mastered 'hard' subjects like neurology and evolutionary biology. This means that with a very little effort they can show up the lesser lights who work on 'soft' subject like History, Literature or Sociology. This, I believe, is the fallacy of false expertise according to which Einstein is an oracle to be consulted on politics, economics or gardening. Plus, we are dealing again (as I pointed out in a previous piece) with the notion that 'the emperor has no clothes: that cultural Marxists or regressive leftists in academia are pretentious fakers who are being exposed by the intellectual heroes of the skeptic movement.

Here I must pause and consider the tendency we no doubt both have to sneer at authors like Shermer from the sanctity of the ivory tower. When I meet people outside the academy I cannot simply say 'so and so is a popular author dismiss them' without looking like a crank myself. My students do come to me with Kant and Hegel in their heads. They come to me with Jordan Peterson or Sam Harris (if they are male) or other influencers of opinion and Shermer fits very much in this mold (though he is a better writer and generally more thoughtful than Dawkins, Harris or their appalling *YouTube* spawn). Indeed, people like Shermer or Bill Nye and James Randi are many people's paradigm of a public intellectual and if their views embody serious philosophical deficiencies that is a matter of concern for all of us for our students may remember these names long after they have forgotten ours. What is more our attempt to school people on the limits of such pop authors will look to non-academics like the expression of professional envy.

Anti-Intellectual Animus

At the same time as people can feel a warm glow of intellectual satisfaction by attaching themselves to a Shermer or Harris, they can indulge an anti-intellectual animus against the self-important academics who are afraid of their ground-breaking ideas. After all, the critics are angry the skeptic has shown them up and are just trying to guard their disciplinary boundaries. This appeal is brutally effective for it is sometimes true. Even when it is not it is intuitively convincing to a non-academic audience who have heard the narrative of the iconoclastic outsider 'genius' many times.

Nothing shuts down a conversation with an Islamophobe faster than revealing you have a doctorate in Religion (as I do) for at that point he *knows* you are a brainwashed regressive

² On the Peterson phenomenon see: <https://bit.ly/2Ivt7HV>.

leftist who has drunk the proverbial cool-aid. At that point he *knows* you are a traitorous intellectual and an apologist for terror. Genuine expertise is thus rejected in favor of a cult of pseudo-expertise attached to people with a general background in the sciences who may, like Dawkins, have done little actual scientific work.

Shermer then is a popular writer who articulates (quite skillfully) the viewpoint of the large and influential ‘skeptical’ community. As such he is a useful foil to launch a discussion. Unfortunately, I wrote *Believing Weird Things* before finding out about the persistent claims of sexual harassment and rape against him (<https://bit.ly/2kK7Q1E>).³

While the jury is out on these accusations Skepticism and Secular humanism are indeed ideologies soaked in testosterone and this may have to partly with the ‘feminization’ of the religious standpoint in the 19th Century. It also has to do with a gendered and colonial construction of ‘reason’ and ‘science’ as ‘impersonal’ ‘objective’ and hence ‘male.’ Being part of a boy’s club certainly encourages the objectification of women as sexual objects who must bow to the superior ‘rationality’ of a man. This is where the ‘skeptic’ cult ceases to be merely annoying and becomes something darker.

I was once happy to think of Skeptics as well-meaning people who are just a bit too enthusiastic to settle for the casual non-belief or semi-belief that is the default position of most people most of the time. I am no longer so sanguine as it metastasizes into an ideology that is increasingly finding itself home on the far right. Neither they (nor, alas, I) are any longer engaged in a civilized discussion about theodicy or the ontological proof. Nor are we discussing the nuances of the separation of church and state.

Skepticism seeks white Anglo-Saxon male supremacy founded on a quasi- religious cult of instrumental reason and science (both poorly understood) of which men are the natural representatives and in which not only ‘religious’ others but women and indigenous people must submit to paternalistic tutelage.⁴ This is an absolute identification of state and religion

³ See— <https://bzfd.it/2wJbj6x>—for some background. The skeptic community seems an odd amalgam of progressives, scientists and libertarians with the latter including magicians, comedians and sci-fi geeks. A backlash against may be one part of what is driving the movement rightwards (along with its inherent ideological commitment to Islamophobia). I am not the first person to have noticed that contemporary atheism is a testosterone-soaked affair depending as it does on moralistic posturing and aggressive verbal sparring— <https://bit.ly/2XBjpdB>. If Ms. Bianco is correct we may add social Darwinism (which is taken to justify aggressive competition) to the stew of sexism and Islamophobia mentioned above. This is also, in part, a legacy of analytic philosophy and its persistent confusion of *eristics* with intellectual rigor. This is something, I am told, which drives many women out of philosophy. To quote Mary Warnock on the matter: “...I think that academic philosophy has become an extraordinarily inward-looking subject, devoted not to exposing and examining the implications of the way we think about the world, but to exposing instead deficiencies in the arguments of other philosophers. If you pick up a professional journal now, you find little but nitpicking responses to previous articles. Women tend to get more easily bored with this than men. Philosophy seems to stop being interesting just when it starts to be professional” (<https://bit.ly/2KEtv9G>).

⁴ See—<https://bit.ly/2XBRKJd>—and—<https://bit.ly/2BsbJ59>. Suffice it to say that New Atheism has never really been about anything but defending Anglo-American supremacy in culture and by extension politically. It is inherently an imperial and reactionary project as Christopher Hitchens’ support of the Iraq war made clear years ago. Sam Harris’ forays into race and IQ are another unfortunate expression of this underlying ideology.

and not nice religion either: as Jeff Kochan says in response to one of my posts: “There is ample historical and ethnographic evidence available to support Wills’s claims. John Sandlos, for example, has shown how the Canadian state, from the late 19th century to around 1970, used wildlife science as a ‘coercive’ and ‘totalizing influence’ in order to assert administrative control over Indigenous lives and lands in Northern Canada (Sandlos 2007; 241, 242)” (<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-43i>).

Weird or Reasonable?

Dentith (2019) gets my intentions exactly right when he says:

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 (49).

I do indeed think that ‘skepticism’ is profoundly deficient in historical sense and part of my motive in leaving the safe confines of Academia (in so many ways comfortable and insulated) and writing the kind of books I have written is the distressing spectacle presented by our civilization of near amnesiacs. One of the reasons I never took to standard analytic philosophy was its deficient historical sense and I have no desire to see this vice become any more general than it already is. Moreover, the fact that the Dawkins/Harris crowd (and their more urbane forefather Shermer) promote a view of religion (in particular) that is not only ahistorical but activated by a total contempt for history as a category I have spent some effort addressing the issue of religious belief both here and elsewhere.

I will conclude Part 1 with what I think are the most crucial points I am trying to make and why I think the ‘Skeptic’ movement is not well intentioned and not doing basically good work in spite of a few over-enthusiastic missteps.

☞ The first is that its false cult of ‘science’ is politically regressive not accidentally but inherently so. This is a point I have made elsewhere in this forum (refer to <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-41T>).

☞ The second is that its ahistorical stance masks reality. ‘Islam’ is a platonic essence that determines directly the nature and behavior of Muslim societies and people regardless of colonialism, orientalism or even the sickening violence we routinely and unthinkingly inflict on Muslims even today.

At any rate Hitchens, Harris and Shermer are all smart people. When smart people take dumb positions then one knows a deep ideological barrier is interfering with the ordinary operation of their intelligence.

‘Faith’ is an abstraction (belief without evidence) that means the same thing at all times and all places Augustine or Paul Tillich be damned. ‘Religion’ is even treated by writers like Dennett as a quasi-natural kind that evolves by Darwinian selection even though the entire notion of ‘religion’ is a construction of modern (western) scholars. In every case contested categories are naively treated as ahistorically simple, univocal concepts. If one believes in the enlightenment (as people like Dawkins and Pinker *say* they do) then you believe in critical rationality and the first object of critical rationality is itself and its own concepts many of which are regional and tensed.

Finally, I work with literature on a regular basis. I consider myself to be an exponent of a culture of reading and the skeptic movement has a pernicious politics of reading grounded on the epistemic privilege of supposed ‘common sense’ (really the ‘common sense’ of the privileged managerial class and the angry white people who support them against their own material interests). According to ‘common sense’ hermeneutics is a sham. Like modern artists, interpreters of the Bible or Koran or other ancient texts are just faking it. Academics are again bullshitting us, pretending to find meaning in nonsense or questioning the simple obvious truth about texts like the *Koran* (which preaches terrorism as any fool reading the literal words in translation can see). Well, I support hermeneutic traditions as a constitutive element of any intelligent appropriation of a text. This is something I have given an account of in an earlier book entitled *Why Believe*. Seemingly, it puts me at odds with the sceptic community who seem to assume that every text has a direct natural sense apart from the pre-judgments of the reader. Exactly as ‘science’ reads nature directly apart from ‘history’ so the ‘skeptical’ reads the text directly, and correctly, in its most immediate literal sense.

At the end of the day, though, I have no particular interest in what people’s religious beliefs are and are not. If, however, you think the cure for dangerous religious beliefs is hermeneutic naiveté, a-historicism and a refusal to engage in ideological self-reflection then those things are as bad as the disease. The idea that people who promote these positions are more ‘rational’ than new agers or Southern Baptists is one I find highly questionable. Such people have appropriated ‘reason’ as a mere word, a talisman in fact and not as a critical cognitive or hermeneutic practice.

If books like *Believing Weird Things* use the notion of the ‘weird’ to disrupt this false appropriation of the enlightenment by the narrow ideologues of ‘reason’ then I suppose they serve their purpose. I do not say this with any confidence they will for these constructs are powerful and well-funded two things this author is not nor will ever be. At any rate these are my reflections on the questions Dentith has raised about the nature and purpose of my book. He has, as I mentioned, some specific criticisms as well but I will address these in Part 2.

Part 2

Fortean or Pyrrhonian Philosophy?

Dentith wonders about the form and genre of the book. He attempts to categorize it as an exercise in ‘Fortean’ philosophy to which I suppose I have no objection except that I prefer the label ‘Pyrrhonian’ because ‘Fortean’ would confine me to the topic of the uncanny and

that is only part of what I touch on in what is, I admit, a wide ranging and eclectic assemblage of topics.

If I have any model at all for a book like this, it would be Montaigne as I hope (on however vastly inferior a level!) to take the reader on a circuitous journey that hopefully leaves her in a less dogmatic and complacent place than before. Both sections of the book are concerned with ideology and dogmatism (from different ends) so the thematic link is 'Pyrrhonism' rather than 'Forteanism'. I am however, in the tradition of Montaigne, as skeptical of skepticism as of anything else and have no problem taking moral stands in print that happen to be urgent to the times we live in. On the other hand, I do like Dentith's characterization of Fort as a "...a systemic pluralist, happily accepting competing or complimentary systems as equally possible." I happen to think that developing a habit of holding complementary systems together in this way is an urgent necessity for the era we live in.

If Dentith's Fortean interests don't carry him through to the second half of the work, I am not concerned. I wrote a collection and a collection is to be put down and picked up when and where the reader pleases. As to why I pursued this and other charged topics like racism and Islamophobia the answer is embarrassingly simple. These are the questions that energize my students and as they come up again and again in my conversations with them I thought them worth 'ruminating' on. They want light as well as heat so that is what I try to provide them and other young, passionately committed people. Old and jaded people, I suppose, address the young first and the rest second and if I have an audience at all I suppose it is them. Plus, if Dentith has given up on arguing with right wing people he considers unreachable they, being youthful and pliant, have not and if I can be of any small aid to them in this endeavor I will consider myself happy.

On Religious Faith and Scientific Faith

Now, a housekeeping matter: Dentith registers an important criticism of Chapter 6 and it is a criticism I am happy to address. This concerns a 'canard' he accuses me of trotting out about 'religious faith' and 'scientific faith' being the same. Actually, I think what I said (as indicated in the title) is that religious faith and scientific faith are closely analogous. Philosophers are, to be sure, very fond of univocal concepts yet not every comparison of A and B asserts a strict identity of A. and B. My essay explored the boundaries between three kinds of 'faith': religious, scientific and hermeneutic. Dentith seems to think there is something impermeable about at least one of these boundaries but he does not say why this is so. He seems to be asserting that religious and scientific faith fundamentally differ because I can be 'doubtful of the gods' and their 'prophets' whereas (I presume?) I cannot be correspondingly doubtful of the entities described by science. If this is what he means, then he is surely wrong.

I can absolutely be as doubtful of the entities of science as I am of the gods and their prophets and I need only point to Descartes' *First Meditation* as an example. In fact, no scientist begins her work day with a systematic test of her senses by means of Cartesian doubt and, to that extent, most of the ordinary claims of scientists rest on what Plato calls *pistis* or opinion. This very same word was used by later Platonists as equivalent to 'faith' as in 'a lively trust in the providence of the gods'. On this precedent I have no problem whatsoever with drawing what seem to me evident analogies between *pistis* as it exists in different domains.

Perhaps, though, he objects to me using the word faith at all in the context of speaking of science but here too he seems to me to be incorrect: faith, at the end of the day, is (at least for the traditions I work within) an assumed attitude to undemonstrated or non-thematic truths and this attitude is a structural part of human experience in any domain scientific religious or otherwise. Thus, unless I have completely misunderstood his objection I do not think it is well taken.

Dentith has a couple of other quibbles. He complains that: "... in chapter 6, he talks about the things 'discovered' by religion. These are presented as being on 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" (51)? Now this might be a bias of mine but I see no difference at all between 'things discovered by religion' and 'things discovered by philosophers working in a religious system' for religions include the latter as a whole includes the part. 'Religious philosophers' are in fact what I study when my formal scholar's hat is on and I don't view them at all as a phenomenon distinct from religion as a whole nor do I see why anyone would.

Nor do I see why a discovery cannot initially take the form of a stipulation or an edict. I may 'discover' the existence of a rhino to you by shouting the edict 'look out!'. In the same way the career of Socrates (and pretty much all philosophers since) may take its start from the injunction of the Delphic oracle. The point I made about hermeneutic culture is that these edicts, stipulations and so forth do not simply remain as such but are launch pads for the internal reflection that leads to insight. This is their demonstrable historical role. Of course, the relationship between these 'revelations' and the discursive reflection built upon them is the whole history of philosophy in late antiquity and the middle ages. But if Dentith wants take up the matter he can begin with Plato's brief and delightful *Ion*.

Dentith does not, however, think *Believing Weird Things* entirely a loss. Indeed, his comments on the first half are on the whole generous for which I heartily thank him. In fact, from his "Fortean" standpoint he has divined some of my intentions quite well. Clearly, he has found this section more suiting to his taste and interest and on that score I have no complaint (a collection of essays can be sampled or read through as the reader's interests dictate). Indeed, he tells us that: "The first section of *Believing Weird Things* is, then, possibly the best defence of a kind of Fortean philosophy one could hope for" (50). I take this is as a generous compliment coming from someone who: "...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" (48-49).

In sum, Dentith, the 'Fortean' liked the 'Fortean' portions of *Believing Weird Things*. That the book was not 'Fortean' through and through is perhaps unfortunate as I do enjoy writing in that vein. However, this, like so many things, is the fault of Donald Trump. I could easily have continued on with ghosts and exorcisms and raining frogs all manner of odd

phenomenon but alas, I found other things began to press upon me. If therefore I made the mistake of writing two books instead of one as both reviewers of my book have complained, it is a mistake I can live with. To conclude, I thank Dr. Dentith for both his praise and blame and for the time has taken to review my book.

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