

# Why People Believe Weird Things

By

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So. Is this Heaven or Hell? Because you know *The World Ended Yesterday!* At least that is what the Rev. **Harold Camping** prophesied in January. He broadcast the message world-wide that *The Rapture* was going to come. He set up billboards in Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. In Vietnam, the government had to disperse an unruly crowd of 5,000 of his followers. Thousands others had going-away parties. It didn't matter to them that he had already made a similar prediction about the *Apocalypse Coming in 1994!* Did you miss it? I did, too! In fact, I'm not sure, but I think we all missed the Rapture yesterday, as well! [Breen]

**Superstitions: they're everywhere!** Lucky charms, unlucky numbers; things not to do—like stepping on a crack, things to do—like knocking on wood; enchanted forests, haunted houses; the list goes on and on!

Do you remember **Franz [or Friedrich] Anton Mesmer** (d. 1815) from whom we get the term, “mesmerize,” as in: to spellbind someone as if by magic? Mesmer claimed to cure physical and mental diseases using “animal magnetism.” Though, his methods were exposed as worthless, many people believed in him. [Wikipedia] Since we survived yesterday and since tomorrow will be the 278<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mesmer's birth, I thought today would be a good time for us to ask: “**Why do people believe in weird things?**”

Let's begin with an historic example: In 1504 **Christopher Columbus** and his crew were anchored off the coast of Jamaica. Their supplies were running low, but the Jamaican Indians refused to sell them anything. Columbus noticed in his almanac that a lunar eclipse was coming. On the day predicted, he called on the Jamaicans. He told them he would blot out the moon unless they sold him food. The Jamaicans laughed. But that night, when the eclipse began, they ran back to him in great terror. He told them he would restore the moon if they would bring him food—which they immediately agreed to do. As the moon re-appeared, the Jamaicans hurried to provide Columbus all the supplies he needed! [Fadiman, 136f.]

“Superstition is the religion of feeble minds,” said **Edmund Burke**. [Copeland, 675] It arises from uneducated ignorance, unmitigated stupidity and unreasonable emotionalism. In every case, the lives of “true believers” are diminished in quality while the lives of those around them are inconvenienced and endangered.

Eclipses illustrate not only the *problem* of superstition, but also the *cure* for superstition! “The First Philosopher” was **Thales** [d. 546 BCE]. He was a brilliant individual. On a trip to Egypt he devised a way to measure the height of the pyramids by measuring their shadows at the time of day when a person's shadow is equal to his height. Back home, in Miletus, he constructed an instrument for measuring the distance of ships sighted at sea. Thales did many fascinating things, but the act that distinguished him as “The First Philosopher” occurred when he did what priests and prophets had been doing for centuries: he predicted a solar eclipse. What made his prediction different was that instead of praying, consulting magical bones or receiving revelations, Thales based his claim on an empirical analysis of the sky. Sure enough, on May 28, 585 B.C.E., just as he had predicted, the light of the sun went out and the light of philosophy shone bright! [Stumpf, 5]

In his book, *Magic, Science, and Religion*, anthropologist **Bronislaw Malinowski** (d. 1942) wrote: “Science is founded on the conviction that experience, effort, and reason are valid; magic on the belief that hope cannot fail nor desire deceive.” [Malinowski, 87; McGlynn]

“Skepticism is the first step on the road to philosophy” [and to science]. [Diderot in Winokur, 253] But **skepticism** is often misunderstood and gets a bad name.

Back in the early 1800s, a farmer and his wife went to a circus for the first time. They stood, amazed, in front of the dromedary's cage. They examined every detail of the misshapen legs, the cloven hooves, the sleepy eyes, and the mounded hump of that tired old camel. Finally, the skeptical farmer turned away in disgust. "Hell," he told his wife, "there ain't no such animal!" [Copeland, 166, adapted]

Such closed-minded rejection of obvious facts is *not* what philosophical and scientific skepticism is about. Nevertheless, some people think it is. In an essay entitled, "The Power of Positive Skepticism," the great evolutionary biologist **Stephen Jay Gould** (d. May 20, 2002) addressed this problem. "Skepticism or debunking," he wrote, "often receives the bad rap reserved for activities—like garbage disposal—that absolutely must be done for a safe and sane life, but seem either unglamorous or unworthy of overt celebration." [Gould, ix]

Echoing **Voltaire** (who said: "As long as people believe in absurdities they will continue to commit atrocities." [Seldes, Quotes, 77]), Gould wrote:

Only two possible escapes can save us from the organized mayhem...that has given us crusades, witch hunts, enslavements and holocausts. Moral decency provides one necessary ingredient, but not nearly enough. The second foundation must come from the rational side of our mentality. For, unless we rigorously use human reason both to discover and acknowledge nature's factuality, and to follow the logical implications... that such knowledge entails, we will lose out to the frightening forces of irrationality, romanticism, uncompromising "true" belief, and the...resulting inevitability of mob action. [Gould, x]

"Skepticism," said Gould, "is the agent of reason against organized irrationalism—and is therefore one of the keys to human social and civic decency." [*Ibid.*]

Despite massive opposition, **the force of reason** has "won great victories...from Supreme Court decisions against creationism to local debunkings of phony psychics and faith healers." The most potent weapons in this battle have been double-blind experimentation and statistical analysis. "Almost every modern irrationalism can be defeated by these...scientific tools," wrote Gould. [Gould, xi]

Gould ended his essay by rejecting the misconception that skepticism is a "nihilistic exercise." Instead, he declared, "proper debunking," when "tied to moral decency," constitute "the most powerful joint instrument for good that our planet has ever known." [Gould, xii]

I cite Stephen Jay Gould for two reasons: First, because he was one of our greatest scientists and humanists—and his death in 2002 was a great loss; and, second, because his essay appears as the "Foreword" of a book that I think we all should read.

Entitled, *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time*, the book was written by **Michael Shermer**, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, Director of the Skeptics Society, host of the Skeptics' Lecture Series at the California Institute of Technology, and professor of the history of science, technology and evolutionary thought at Occidental College in Los Angeles. [Shermer, dust jacket]

Shermer's book is about "the distinction between science and pseudoscience, history and pseudohistory, and the difference it makes." [Shermer, 6] He covers such topics as: psychic power and extrasensory perception, UFOs and alien abductions, ghosts and haunted houses, Creation-Science and biblical literalism, the Holocaust and Holocaust denial, race and IQ, political extremism and the Radical Right, modern witch crazes, Satanism, and much more. [*Ibid.*] His book is a "celebration of the scientific spirit" and of the importance of skepticism.

Like Gould, Shermer knows that

Some people...confuse *skeptic* with *cynic* and think that skeptics are a bunch of grumpy curmudgeons unwilling to accept any claim that challenges the status quo. This is wrong. *Skepticism is a...method, not a position.* Ideally, skeptics do not go into an investigation closed to the possibility that a phenomenon might be real or that a claim might be true. [Rather, they draw their conclusions from the evidence.] [Shermer, 8]

This morning, I want to tell you what Shermer says in his last chapter, “Why *Do* People Believe Weird Things?” [Shermer, 273-278]

Shermer begins by talking about “firewalking.” In 1996 he went on the PBS television show *Bill Nye “The Science Guy,”* an educational program for children. To debunk pseudoscience and the paranormal, he walked barefoot across a six-foot long bed of red-hot coals registering 800 degrees Fahrenheit. No trickery was involved and he emerged totally unscathed. How could that be?! The answer is scientifically simple. He explained this way: “When you bake a cake in an oven...the air, the cake, and the metal pan are all at 400°F, but only the pan will burn your skin. Hot coals...are like the cake—they do not conduct heat very quickly” and so, as long as someone walks across the bed of coals rapidly, no harm will be done. [Shermer, 273]

Shermer uses firewalking to raise the question, “What constitutes a ‘weird thing’?” [Shermer, 273f.]

I have no formal definition. Weird things are like pornography—difficult to define but obvious when you see them... One person’s weird thing might be another’s cherished belief. Who’s to say?

Well, he answers, sometimes scientists can say. To clarify, he tells us about Tony Robbins, “the self-help guru who got his start in the early 1980s by holding weekend seminars climaxing in a firewalk.” Robbins told his audiences that if they could walk on hot coals, they could do anything, for great achievements are all about mind over matter. But, as Shermer says:

Can Tony Robbins really walk barefoot over hot coals without burning his feet? Sure he can. So can I. So can you. But you and I can do it without meditating, chanting, or paying hundreds of dollars for a seminar because [as scientists have shown] firewalking has nothing to do with mental powers. [Shermer, 274]

“Belief that it does is what I would call a weird thing.” [Shermer, 274]

There are a lot of weird things to believe in: alien abductions; Creationism; crystal power; E.S.P.; faith-healing; ghosts; life after death; the Loch Ness Monster; near-death experiences; past-lives; pyramid power; psychics; reincarnation; Sasquatch or Big Foot; UFO alien visitors; voodoo; and on and on! The question that begs to be answered is: “What is going on in our culture and thinking that leads to such beliefs?”

Many theories exist: “no education, miseducation, lack of critical thinking, rise of religion, decline of religion, displacement of traditional religion by cults, fear of science, the New Age, the Dark Ages revisited, too much television, not enough reading, reading the wrong books, poor parenting, lousy teachers, and plain old ignorance and stupidity.” Shermer argues that “there is not a single answer,” but there can be discerned **five “underlying motivations.”** [Shermer, 275]

**First** is what Shermer calls “*credo consolans*”: people believe many things merely because they want to and because it makes them feel good. He cites a Gallup poll which shows that 96% of American adults believe in God, 90% in Heaven, 79% in miracles, and 72% in angels. The fact that such beliefs contradict logic and have insufficient empirical evidence to convince either scientists or courts of law is not as important to most people as the comfort they get from believing. Even “skeptics and scientists are not immune.” Shermer points

out that no less a skeptical scientist than **Martin Gardner** (d. May 22, 2010) confessed to being a “fideist.” [Shermer, 275] Gardner wrote:

Fideism refers to believing something on the basis of faith, or emotional reasons rather than intellectual reasons... I don't think there are any arguments that prove the existence of God or...immortality... More than that I think the better arguments are on the side of the atheists. So it [his own theism] is a case of quixotic emotional belief that really is against the evidence. [Shermer, 276]

Mark Twain summarized this approach when he said: “Faith is believing what you know ain't so.” [Byrne, 138] Nevertheless, many people do believe all kinds of things merely because they want to and because it makes them feel good. As long ago as 348 B.C.E., **Demosthenes** knew this, for he wrote: “Nothing is so easy as to deceive one's self; for what we wish, that we readily believe.” [Seldes, Quotes, 73]

The **second** motivation cited by Shermer is “**immediate gratification.**” [Shermer, 276] Most weird beliefs provide instant satisfaction, whereas the knowledge one can acquire from science and philosophy usually takes a long time to acquire and to understand.

Shermer compares psychic telephone hotlines to psychotherapy. In both cases, people tend to seek out help for problems involving love, health, money, or career. The psychic's job is to keep the caller on the line as long as possible at around \$3.95 per minute. Using mind-reading techniques taken straight out of vaudeville acts and circus sideshow scams, the psychic says ambiguous things like, “I sense there is tension in your relationship” or “You've been thinking about changing careers.” Since such trite statements are true for most people, the caller is impressed. If one such comment fails to connect, the psychic tries another and another until one works.

As Shermer says, “Skeptics don't spend \$3.95 a minute on psychic hotlines, believers do.” They call “mostly at night and on weekends” because they're lonely and “need someone to talk to.” The soft, soothing, sympathetic sophistry of the psychic is quick and cheap, sort of the “poor man's counseling.” [Shermer, 276]

In contrast, “psychotherapy is formal, expensive, and time-consuming. Deep insight and improvement may take months or years. Delay of gratification is the norm...” [Shermer, 276]

**Third** on Shermer's list is “**simplicity.**” Weird beliefs usually offer simplistic explanations for what really require complex and difficult answers. As Shermer says:

Good and bad things happen to both good and bad people... Scientific explanations are often complicated and require training and effort to work through. Superstition and belief in fate and the supernatural provide a simpler path through life's complex maze. [Shermer, 277]

To show that some people will accept any explanation so long as it's simpler than other explanations, Shermer reports the prank of **Harry Edwards**, head of the Australian Skeptics Society. Edwards published a letter in his local newspaper claiming that he had discovered a correlation between various lucky events and his pet chicken's droppings. He “ended his letter by offering to sell his ‘lucky chicken crap’” to interested readers. Believe it or not, orders started coming in! [Shermer, 277]

“**Morality and meaning**” are a **fourth** motivation for believing in weird things. “Scientific and secular systems of morality and meaning have proved relatively unsatisfying to most people,” Shermer writes. [Shermer, 277] I can testify to that. Having taught Ethics and Philosophy for many years, I know firsthand that most people will not take the time to do the work that is required to learn and understand the systems of the great philosophers and ethicists. Without such intellectual digging, they never find the buried treasures and so they go away dissatisfied.

Shermer says people ask, “Without belief in some higher power...why be moral?” [Shermer, 277] That same foolish question was often asked of early **Universalists** because they rejected the doctrine of eternal damnation. One man challenged America’s Universalist founder **John Murray**, “If there’s no Hell, what’s to stop me from going out and robbing, raping and murdering?” Murray challenged him right back, “Whether or not there is a Hell, why, sir, would you want to do those things?!”

“Scientists and secular humanists have good answers” to questions about morality and the meaning of life says Shermer, “but...to most people, science seems to offer only cold and brutal logic in its presentation of an infinite, uncaring, and purposeless universe.” Such an outlook is just too “threatening” for the masses, and so they turn to the comforting consolation of pseudoscience, superstition, myth, magic and religion. [Shermer, 277]

Finally, Shermer describes the **fifth** motivation by the phrase, “**Hope springs eternal.**” [Shermer, 278] Another phrase also comes to my mind: “Grasping at straws.”

Human life is often frightening, dangerous and deadly. Disaster, disease and death are inescapable. Human anxiety abounds. [See *TIME*’s cover story, “Understanding Anxiety,” June 10, 2002; Gorman]

In spite of that, “humans are, by nature, a forward-looking species always seeking greater levels of happiness and satisfaction. Unfortunately, writes Shermer, “the corollary is that humans are all too often willing to grasp at unrealistic promises of a better life...” [Shermer, 278]

**Edward Gibbon**, in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, wrote: “Skepticism...may amuse a few inquisitive minds. But...superstition is so congenial to the multitude that, if they are forcibly awakened, they still regret the loss of their pleasing vision.” [Seldes, Quotes, 900] Such a pronouncement makes the beautiful wish of **Baruch Spinoza** all the less likely of ever coming true. He wrote in 1670: “How blest would our age be if it could witness a religion freed from all the trammels of superstition!” [Woods, 973]

Nevertheless, there is one religion—**Unitarian Universalism**—which comes close to his desire, for we are guided not only by Moses and Jesus, but also by Darwin and Freud. Indeed, our sources of inspiration include all of the world’s major prophets, philosophers and scientists. In this rational, skeptical approach we follow the wisdom of yet another genius, **Gautama, the Buddha**, who said:

Believe nothing...merely because you have been told it...or because it is traditional, or because you yourselves have imagined it. Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings—that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide. [Seldes, Quotes, 73]

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#### Sources

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