

The Skeptic Syndrome

Author: Dr. Edgar Wunder

Published: 1998 / 2019

Languages: [DE](#), [EN](#)

“The Skeptic Syndrome” is an essay first published by Dr. Edgar Wunder in 1998, in which he works out the formative mentality patterns of the so-called “skeptics” from a sociological perspective. Dr. Wunder was joint founder and member of the board of many years of the German skeptic organization GWUP, ranks in the meantime however among their most well-known critics. The new publication of its revealing investigation is to serve to be able to classify these nowadays predominantly in the Internet – for instance on Wikipedia – acting grouping and their world view better.

Preliminary note

I am one of 19 founding members of the “Skeptic” organization “Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften e.V.”, founded in October 1987 (GWUP), was from 1992 to December 1998 their “specialist area leader” for the topic astrology, from 1996 to July 1998 member of the administrative board of the GWUP, from 1994 to December 1998 member of the editorship of the magazine *Skeptiker* published by the GWUP and – last not least – from September 1996 to December 1998 the responsible editor-in-chief of the *Skeptiker*.

Before this background I know the GWUP from the interior perspective as well as surely only very few others. According to statute it is the self-declared goal of the GWUP, “to examine alleged paranormal phenomena without bias with scientific methods, as well as to promote such investigations and to report on their results”, “to promote critical thinking”, to operate an appropriate “clearing-up of the public” and “to co-operate with like-minded persons, organizations and institutions”. According to statements of the former GWUP member of the board Rainer Rose in an Editorial of the magazine *Skeptiker* (number 4/97) this means to take “a genuine neutral center”, i.e. “to meet judgements, positive like negative, only after a careful examination, and then with the necessary circumspection

Praiseworthy goals, but my experiences with many members of the GWUP are unfortunately different.

There is within the GWUP a whole set of members, who want to lead without sufficient technical knowledge of the respective matter a kind world view fight against everything, which they associate with the term “paranormal”, which accept thereby also (consciously or unconsciously) a selective one-sided representation of the facts and arguments as well as occasionally also emotional-unobjective rhetorical tactics, while they are interested in scientific investigations to Parawissenschaften at the most to that extent in so far as their results could supply “cannon fodder” for public campaigns.

In the middle of the 90’s became increasingly conscious me in my position as one of the prominent GWUP functionaries that the relevant discrepancy between the requirement (and/or partly also the self picture) and the reality of the GWUP was in such a manner substantial that it could not be dismissed no more than regrettable pathology on the individual level of individual members. Rather it concerned completely obviously a structural characteristic of the “Skeptiker” movement, as also a comparison with similar organizations in other countries resulted in.

As a sociologist I decided to use my position as GWUP functionary in order to work out a characteristic set of typical mentality patterns by a systematic investigation of internal communication in “Skeptiker” circles, which seems to coin the real existing “Skeptiker” movement, independently of whether it converges with the self-manifestation of the movement outwardly or not.

In addition in the time from February 1997 to March 1998 carefully and according to plan verbal like written expressions were collected, documented and categorized by GWUP members, which took place situatively under conditions, with which the concerning believed themselves “among themselves” and the danger seemed small that they fell into the mode of the self-manifestation outwardly or the recitation of idealized self pictures (e.g. internal executive committee meetings, ensembles, private discussions etc.), naturally without the observed participants of this project knew.

The result of the study was a catalog of characteristics conceived as a polythetical set, which I called the “skeptical syndrome”. In April 1998 I wrote the first draft of the present article on this basis, which remained under lock and key until further notice and was later supplemented by a few more recent examples. In June 1998, I presented this catalog of characteristics and most of the results and reflections on the “Skeptiker” movement presented below for the first time in detail to the public during a two-hour colloquium lecture at the Freiburg Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Hygiene (IGPP).

It was now the exciting question whether the movement would be able to bear that one of its functionaries drew such an uncritical and unsparing picture of his own group and that he combined this – especially in his sphere of influence and responsibility (i.e. especially the association journal *Skeptiker*) with very concrete measures aimed at overcoming the mental sets socially cultivated in “skeptical” groups. It was not.

In August 1998 I was “removed” by the GWUP executive committee without previous consultation from the GWUP administrative board and dismissed few months later also as “Skeptiker” – editorship leaders and from all other functions. Thereupon I published in February 1999 the already long before compiled text “the Skeptiker syndrome” now also in the Internet (supplemented by one in January 1999 additionally written longer appendix, in which I described my personal biographic history in and with the “Skeptiker” movement).

Although it had long been clear at that time that the “Skeptical Movement” could not be reformed in this respect for structural reasons and that I would therefore resign, I postponed my resignation for some time. Because I was interested in it, how the forthcoming general meeting of the members would stand in May 1999 to the question, to what extent such GWUP critical expressions were permitted at least as “simple member”.

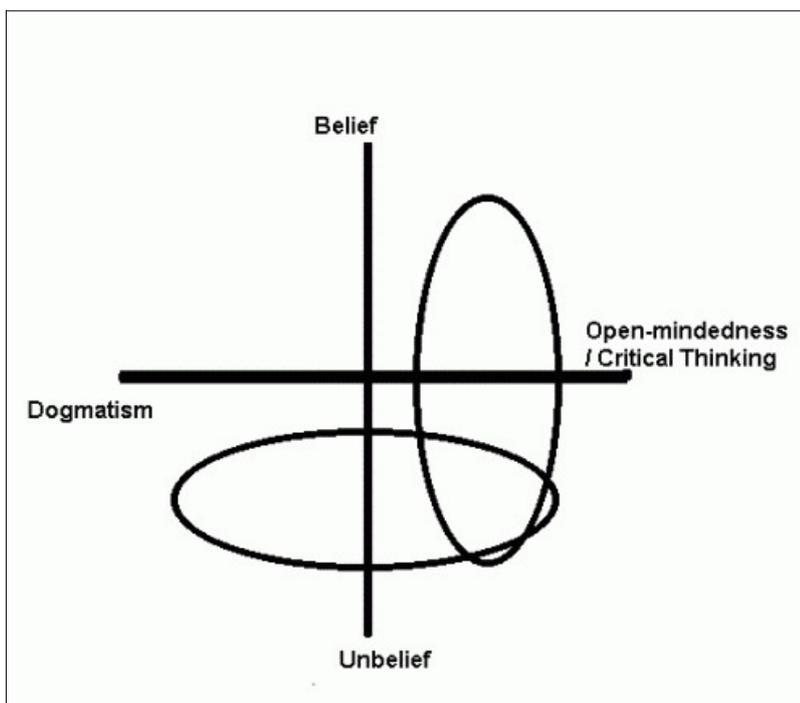
As from me due to the past experiences not differently expected, the meeting of the members decided indeed with large majority to exclude me immediately also as simple member from the GWUP. I am grateful to my investigation object, the GWUP, for the fact that so my quasi-experimental program, which runs since August 1997, which standards and sanction mechanisms steer the "Skeptiker" movement, could be converted in its entirety.

Skeptics? – Problems of concepts and the consequences

GWUP members call themselves usually "Skeptiker" and feel as part of a world-wide "Skeptiker movement", which wrote itself the "fight against the Paranormal and Pseudoscience" on the flags ("battle against the paranormal and pseudoscience" – so the world-wide leading American "Skeptiker" – organization CSICOP in a press release to the "2. world skeptics congress" in Heidelberg in July 1998).

The problems begin with the fact that the term "skeptical" is associated with (at least) two different semantic dimensions, which are repeatedly confused both by the public and above all within so-called "skeptical" organizations.

The two dimensions are illustrated in the graphic shown: On the one hand there is the dimension "belief – unbelief" (e.g. regarding the "paranormal", whatever that may be), on the other hand there is the dimension "dogmatism – open mindedness / critical thinking". Here it has to be emphasized, that "unbelief" does not mean only "non-belief", but the "unbelief", understood as "disbelief", is a belief-system itself.



A widespread and consequential short-sightedness in "skeptical" organizations consists in not perceiving that these two dimensions are not identical, that "critical thinking" does not necessarily have to coincide with "unbelief", just as "dogmatism" does not necessarily have to coincide with "belief". Rather, empirically individuals can be found in all four quadrants of the graph. In the discourse among members of "skeptical" organizations, however, it is customary to use the term "skeptical" both in the meaning of "critically thinking people" and in the meaning of "persons who do not believe in the paranormal", so both are equated.

For clarification, a survey among the readers of the *Skeptical Inquirer* may serve as an example, which CSICOP chairman Paul Kurtz had conducted in spring 1998: There, five alternative answers were given to the question "Which of the following would you say best describes your point of view?" (the results of the survey are given in brackets): "Strong skeptic" (77.5%), "Mild skeptic" (16.2%), "Neutral" (2.4%), "Mild believer" (1.0%), "Strong believer" (0.4%).

From this it can probably be deduced that, firstly, for Kurtz the term "skeptical" means the opposite of "believer", i.e. it stands for "unbelief" (or at least that Kurtz suspects such a category scheme in the minds of the readers of the *Skeptical Inquirer*), secondly, that for Kurtz the position of a "skeptical" is not "neutral". Third, that at least among CSICOP supporters, empirically only a vanishing minority considers itself "neutral".

If "skeptical" were to be understood in the context of this survey in the sense of "open mindedness / critical thinking", terms like "mildly skeptic" or "neutral" would be quite meaningless or difficult to understand. Obviously, "skeptical" here means an "unbeliever" with respect to the "paranormal". (Numerous other text passages from "skeptical" publications could be cited in which the skeptical term is quite obviously used in this meaning)

On the other hand, there is, for example, the following understanding of the term, which “skeptical” organizations often cite in their public self-portrayals: “A skeptic in our understanding accepts as little as possible as given, but is prepared to question and check every statement. In particular he is also ready to subject his own opinion to a critical examination. With this attitude skepticism stands in contrast to dogmatism. Skepticism does not mean blindly rejecting other opinions or even “denying” the existence of paranormal phenomena from the outset.

(This sentence is taken from the official GWUP presentation brochure and was written by myself in 1996 for the GWUP – in a normative sense, as it should actually be in “skeptical” organizations, not necessarily as description of a real condition)

The question is now, in the sense which of the two term understandings the real existing “Skeptiker” movement is composed. In other words: Does the “belief / unbelief” dimension form the demarcation line for the membership of those movements, or is it the “dogmatism / open mindedness-critical thinking” dimension? Related to the graphic: Which of the two sets shown in the figure corresponds to the real composition e.g. of the GWUP?

Since at least no single member of the GWUP is known to me, which one could settle in the right upper quadrant, however a whole set of members, who are to be classified probably undoubtedly in the left lower quadrant (and who internally partly do not even shrink from it internally to call their own position even “ideological”!), there can be in my opinion no serious doubt that the real existing GWUP corresponds to the quantity represented in the diagram down.

This has consequences. Because it means that the cohesion of the group is endangered and it is threatened from falling apart in the case that a serious, result open, equal and collegial discussion with persons in the right upper sector is to take place, because the persons in the left lower quadrant fear then a “abandonment of the skeptical (unbelief) profile” or even a questioning of the group identity.

The same can happen if group members in the lower right sector openly criticize persons in the lower left sector and/or emphasize that certain results of empirical studies seem to contradict the “unbelief” belief system and therefore call for a serious, open, informed scientific debate.

The result is considerable tensions and conflicts within the group, which inevitably have to occupy the board of directors of such an association, since it is not difficult to see that any kind of questioning or even shifting of the group boundaries in the graph could lead to serious distortions, even waves of exits.

The board of directors will therefore essentially try to maintain the status quo of the group in the graphic and threaten those who, in its eyes, could endanger this status quo with sanctions and, if necessary, use force to implement appropriate measures and “cleansing”. What took place in the year 1998 within the GWUP (and was indicated above), is in this regard almost a textbook example for such a dynamic.

The Skeptiker syndrome as ideal-typical polythetic set

In order to understand why a threat potential is quickly seen here that threatens the stability of the group as a whole, some typical characteristics must be listed, which particularly characterize the persons in the lower left quadrant of the graph. This is an ideal-typical polythetic set, which I call the “skeptical syndrome”.

This means that the syndrome has to be considered as given with respect to a concrete individual already if some of the following characteristics are fulfilled (not all of them have to be true in every single case).

At the same time, it is an emergent phenomenon, i.e. something new is created when many of the characteristics come together in their specific combination and inner relation: the mentality of the ideal-typical “skeptical” as a socio-cultural reality, which, especially in social communalization (in a “community of opinion”), is constantly being created, affirmed and stabilized anew.

In this respect, we are dealing primarily with a social phenomenon, not just with the attitudes of isolated individuals. The “skeptical” movement is the social place where this specific set of mental patterns is handed down and reproduced.

So what are the individual elements of the characteristic set of this syndrome?

(1) Those “skeptical” see the primary or even the only goal of the group in lobbying and public relations work with the aim of suppressing certain “paranormal” beliefs in the population or to “put a stop to” the active representatives of such beliefs. In this respect it is about mission and advocacy, in which **(2)** the execution of own scientific investigations is regarded as relatively superfluous, since it is anyway clear “that everything is nonsense”.

(Since the knowledge of relevant facts and scientific studies on the respective topic is usually not too great among those persons, then “public relations” is often limited in content to popularizing the name of one’s own organization in connection with mere opinions or with other borrowed facts)

(3) One’s own group is not understood as a “scientific (research) community”, but as a social movement, as a “conspired (attitude) community” with ultimately political goals, namely to help one’s own idea of “rationalism” to make a breakthrough in society as a whole. One must therefore take an example in terms of procedure and other questions from political parties, not from scientific societies.

(4) Within the framework of such a view, one’s own group finds itself in a constant battle situation in which internal differences of opinion are only perceived as obstacles and unity is expected, at least externally. Corresponding pressure to conform is exerted in the “ingroup”. A group that sees itself in such a combat situation naturally has little interest in democratic votes and procedures within its own ranks, since – similar to an army – they are only perceived as a hindrance and counterproductive for the actual goal, i.e., closed external action.

As registered association the GWUP is formally democratically structured (approximately in contrast to the American CSICOP), but the reality looks in such a way that e.g. in the opinion of a GWUP member of the board meetings of the members are to serve only for it, “in order to draw together

strength" and to strengthen in harmony the "feeling of belonging together". Controversial discussions, debates or even votes are regarded for this purpose only as contradictory and therefore if possible to prevent.

Thus there were in my memory in the entire 12-jährige history of the GWUP with elections of the executive committee also still never two competing candidates around an office for an executive committee, and the appropriate persons were always suggested by the executive committee itself. Real practiced association democracy is, so me opposite a GWUP member of the board "unnecessary luxury", which one can do without confidently, since the tasks of the GWUP are others.

Persons subject to the skeptic syndrome are to be recognized not least also (5) by the frequent use of the word "we" (instead of "I"): It concerns constantly the fact that "we" must compete against "those" and hold together; and if "we" among themselves controversially discussed, "those" would laugh themselves only in the Fäustchen etc. (ingroup-outgroup polarization). Therefore, controversies within the group would also have to be ended as quickly as possible.

While (6) on the outside, attack and criticism are written in capital letters, on the inside an already dysfunctional conflict avoidance strategy prevails almost at all costs, at least as far as the leadership bodies are concerned.

(7) "Outgroup" positions, on the other hand, should under no circumstances be given a forum, neither in publications nor at conferences, because this would be "advertising" for the opponent, who would already have "enough opportunities"; one should not "further enhance his status" in this way.

That groupthink symptoms thrive under such conditions need not be further emphasized. I experienced within the GWUP committee meetings, with which all participants insured themselves mutually that a certain study "nonsense" and "disproved" was, without even one single participant would have read that study, relevant arguments or a "refutation" could have led.

(8) Even discovered, sometimes embarrassing, demonstrable errors and false assertions by individual members are hardly ever criticized within the organization (and certainly not publicly!), but are tolerated as long as they do not run counter to the organization's own convictions with regard to their objectives. "The main thing against it" seems to be the motto for many.

So it was possible for example that a former GWUP member attacked Gauquelins thesis of a "Mars effect" for years with as can be prove wrong arguments violently. Even as this person (for other reasons) no more GWUP member was, saw itself except me none to a critical processing forced. In many other examples members told me in private that they considered these and those statements of other members as as can be prove wrong, did not want to criticize them however openly, "in order not to harm the skeptical movement".

(9) Perceived potential dangers and threats play a major role for those "skeptics" and their motivation. "Defending the rational world from a rising tide of nonsense" (Paul Kurtz) is a task that is vital for the future existence of society and humanity and requires all efforts.

In this connection also (10) the social meaning and the influence possibilities of the own group, i.e. the "skeptical" organization, are overestimated excessively by many members. They see themselves as a unique and indispensable elite, on whose actions the further development of society depends to a large extent.

(11) This goes hand in hand with a repeatedly expressed strong emotional-personal consternation ("it ran hot and cold down my back"), when those "skeptics" are confronted with various "esoteric" ideas and practices, e.g. in the acquaintance with them. It is (12) a large emotional satisfaction to be at least once in the year as participants of a GWUP conference "among themselves" to be able to be and off one from the irrationalism plagued world mutually strengthen themselves – why controversial discussions with "Nicht-Skeptikern" on such a conference are felt as "disturbing" and rejected strictly. In this context, (13) the common "listening to each other about ..." is obviously also felt to be particularly community-building.

In general (14) is only meaningful to deal with such para-scientific conceptions, from which a serious danger for humans and society proceeds, everything else is insignificant. Only in the rarest of cases is (15) the "danger" (more precisely: the chance-risk relation) proven by empirical studies or assessments, but rather individual cases (whose representativeness is questionable), subjective experiences, horror scenarios and feelings of concern are used to argue – in principle only as a mirror image of so-called "esotericists", who want to convince us of the salvific benefit of their respective systems with similar arguments.

(16) If one asks those "skeptics" why they deal with such topics at all, one does not get the answer because they find this or that question interesting, but rather threatening dangers are imagined, which is why one has to fight against certain ideas.

Otherwise, however, (17) those "skeptics" are concerned only with whether a certain assertion is "true" or not. If it is not true – and this one believes to know anyway already – it is often hastily classified as "dangerous. For the reference to "dangerousness" is needed to ultimately justify political action in which one is primarily interested.

The fact (18) that the questions about the truth content and the chance/risk relation are relatively independent of each other and cannot simply be reduced to each other is hardly seen, just as little (19) that, for example, the questions about the psychology and sociology of such "paranormal" belief systems would be of central interest and worthy of empirical investigation. In any case this is not regarded as affair of the GWUP. This ignorance and one-sided fixation on the question about the truth content is naturally also therefore naive, since without clarifying the psychosocial background probably never an effective "clearing-up work" will be able to be carried out.

In any case, (20) these persons hardly start out from (for them open) questions, but rather from (for them fixed) answers.

(21) The followers of "paranormal" convictions – or those who think differently in general – are pathologized. They are accused of a lack of cognitive abilities ("nutcases," "fools," "insane," etc.) or criminal intentions ("impostors," "charlatans," etc.).

This is often accompanied **(22)** by a willingness to repress, a call for the courts, for the state, for aggressive campaigns, for example to ensure that certain persons are no longer invited to adult education centers, etc.

It is also noticeable that many such “skeptics” are outwardly, publicly, rather cautious with such pathologizations of their “opponents”, since they have recognized that this can be counterproductive; within the group, however, they do not mince matters (“internally, one must be allowed to say so openly”), which shows **(23)** that their public statements have a tactical character, but do not correspond to their actual convictions.

It is a characteristic of prejudiced persons that they **(24)** believe in the inherent inferiority of a certain group and/or that humans are already judged already negatively only due to their group affiliation. It was for me astonishing, how fast a whole set of GWUP members already (sometimes drastic!) judgements over (them otherwise unknown) persons or even over the (them only quite unknown) scientific quality of their work fell, as soon as only their affiliation to a certain real existing group admits or also only maintained (!) became – or as soon as the person concerned was provided by another GWUP member in short form with a certain “label” (particularly popular is: “Esoteriker”).

(25) The terms selected in the discourse are likewise typical for those “Skeptiker”: It concerns from the outset evaluating to defamierende terms (e.g. “superstition”, “humbug”, “pseudoscience”, “charlatans”, “sects”, “PSI exponents” – as a term for parapsychologists – and so on), not largely descriptive-analytical terms (e.g. “parascience”, “anomalies”, “extraordinary human experiences” and so on).

Also **(26)** the attribution of the term “paranormal” to certain alleged phenomena often already has a defamatory character here, since the term has negative connotations for those persons and is sometimes used almost synonymously with “nonsensical”. Typically **(27)** such “skeptics” equate the term “parascience”, if used, with the term “pseudoscience” and do not differentiate further here.

(28) This is accompanied by a lack of willingness to differentiate between different parascientific disciplines: often everything is lumped together and undifferentiatedly spoken of as a “belief in the paranormal” (which has to be fought), as if we were dealing with a somehow uniform system of belief – a notion that has long been empirically refuted.

(29) Similarly, insufficient differentiation is made in the perception of the social conflict field around parascience: Stereotypical “camp thinking” prevails, with a frequent division into “wolves” (=“para-representatives”), “sheep” (= the population to be “protected”) and “guardians” (=the organized “skeptics”).

(30) Anyone who questions such simplistic stereotypes and calls for a “cross-camp” dialogue is accused of “sitting between all stools” and of being only conditionally trustworthy, or at least “naive.”

(31) The demonizations of the “other side” are moreover accompanied by a willingness to generalize very quickly from a single person to, for example, “all parapsychologists. This is not surprising, because in social psychology it is a typical feature of dogmatic thinking or of “closed-mindedness” that perceptions, ideas and judgments that affect positively evaluated objects are much more precise and complex than those that affect negatively evaluated objects.

(32) Those “skeptics” have hardly – as a rule none – personal friendly contacts with leading “para-scientists” or “esotericists”, which would be theoretically possible without further ado despite differences of opinion as regards content, and would even be almost obvious if a fair open dialogue were sought.

Such “skeptics” are not interested in such contacts at all, they do not take part (apart from some esotericism fairs as a curiosity at their own place of residence) also **(33)** in any events of the “other camp”, since they do not expect any gain of information, but at most annoyance about “all the nonsense”.

(34) At the same time, these “skeptics” do not read any publications from the parascientific field (e.g., Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie, Journal of Scientific Exploration), just as little from the esoteric field (e.g., Esotera, Magazin 2000). According to a survey among skeptic relations, which I conducted in 1997, about 90% of the GWUP members do not read any such magazine. They are accordingly badly informed, both about current developments in the “Esoterik scene”, and – and this is more important – over various investigations (and/or also the discussion conditions generally), as they are published again and again e.g. in the mentioned “parawissenschaftlichen” magazines.

According to the inquiry mentioned **(35)** – apart from the own “house sheet” skeptics and other “skeptical” literature – the regular source of information to Parawissenschaften for most GWUP members forms rather the general daily and weekly press as well as popular scientific magazines. (Although also scientific technical periodicals of the in each case own discipline – e.g. chemistry, biology, physics etc. – are used. – read, these contain however as well known hardly any articles to parawissenschaftlichen topics)

This applies after my experiences also to the predominant number of persons with leading positions within the GWUP, e.g. to executive committees or members of the science advice of the GWUP. (The so-called GWUP “science advice” stands however essentially anyway only on the paper and is quasi inactive, serves rather only as academic “signpost”)

(36) It is missing therefore usually at fundamental fact knowledge, which is maintained at all actually by parawissenschaftlicher side and which not. The judgments rather refer to various partly misleading stereotypes that are common in the media.

After my experiences e.g. a completely substantial portion of the GWUP membership has no idea, which is for instance the difference between “signs of the zodiac” and “constellations”, which the expression “meeting of the third kind” really correctly means or which different “parapsychological” mechanisms exist in Germany or how they are institutionalized – which does not prevent many from announcing themselves loudly to astrology, ufology, Parapsychologie or other topics to word, to a large extent with accordingly unqualified proclamations.

In this context, **(37)** probably also the frequent blanket invocation of well-known “debunkers” (especially James Randi and his \$1 million bet) as authorities and role models instead of giving concrete arguments.

It is generally popular **(38)** to declare that one “bet” that this and that effect will turn out (in an indefinite time!) to be an artifact: this makes it possible to demonstrate high subjective certainty without having to deal with the matter in greater detail.

(39) Own investigative activity on parascience usually does not occur at all, since it is already clear anyway that everything is “nonsense”, what else should be investigated?

(40) If “investigations” are carried out at all, then only to demonstrate to a broad public what one already believes to be certain anyway (the term “demonstrations” would thus be more appropriate), but not to trace questions which one still considers open and where one sees a serious need for research. In the latter case – since the financial means are limited – a competitive relationship would exist to the public work, which enjoys the absolute primacy within the GWUP without any doubt.

Since there is nothing more seriously to examine within the Parawissenschaften, appropriate investigations are time and money waste; the means should be better used for an intensification of the public work. If I am convinced that a certain effect does not exist, why should I spend a lot of time and money to investigate this alleged effect? I would rather convince the public of my opinion. But this is not a science, it is ultimately a religious-missionary attitude.

A member of the science advice (!) of the GWUP (today director/conductor of the GWUP office) said me on my suggestion to invite to GWUP conferences external advisers to presentations of newer empirical investigations (externally, since there is GWUP internally hardly such advisers) that empirical investigations are nevertheless anyway boring, that is “always the same”, which one should expect there already new, from such presentations it does not think anything.

If anything is investigated at all, then **(41)** there are cases that are relatively easy to refute and are already very questionable (e.g. obvious charlatanism in the field of esotericism), while the “harder nuts” (e.g. various parapsychological laboratory experiments) are given a wide berth. It would be appropriate for a scientific attitude to turn critically to the best arguments of the (so felt) “opposite side”, not as a substitute to the weakest.

(42) If someone in the “other camp” undertakes scientific research on parascience, this is perceived as a nuisance that one would like to avoid if one could, provided that the researcher in question receives public funds to finance his study.

(43) There is no positive attitude to spend money on scientific studies of parascience. If one considers that this applies to a completely substantial part of the members of the GWUP, the name “society for the scientific investigation of Parawissenschaften” can be understood actually only as a label swindle.

One asks oneself, which function the group has at all for many members of the GWUP. Innumerable times I got as responsible editorship leaders of the Skeptiker from the readership and from the membership of the GWUP inquiries and statements following sense content: **(44)** “That Parawissenschaften are nonsense, I know anyway. I need the GWUP above all therefore, in order to be able to justify well, why it is nonsense “.

A scientific attitude does not hide itself behind it certainly not. It concerns for many members of the GWUP obviously to win social security in the group for their already firmly existing convictions and prejudices to get it socially by a group confirmed, which is felt as authoritative, as well as argumentation assistance for appropriate discussions in the own social surrounding field to receive.

(45) A further characteristic of the skeptic syndrome seems to me to be a particular caution, even pride, in the term “skeptical”. Such persons often answer the question “Who are the skeptics?” in short, with “We are” – and thus introduce a third meaning of the “skeptical” term by simply using it **(46)** as a term for the “ingroup”.

One has to consider exactly what ultimately happens by **(47)** equating the three “skeptical” meanings without reflection: “critically thinking people” = “not believers in paranormal things” = “ingroup”. The members of one’s own group (“skeptical”) are thereby not only secretly declared by definition to be critically thinking people (“skeptical”), but also their content-related position (“skeptical” as “unbelievers”) is determined.

If criticism of “skeptical” (ingroup) is practiced from outside, **(48)** the reply is that “skeptical” mean “in reality” nothing more than “critically thinking people” and in this respect the criticism of the “skeptical” (now again “ingroup”) is unjustified.

Conversely, someone **(49)** can quickly be declared an “outgroup” (“non-skeptical”) by imputing to him “belief in the paranormal” (= “non-skeptical”), without there still being any need for an examination with respect to the remaining “skeptical” dimension of critical thinking.

Sensitized to the different meanings of the “Skeptiker” – term I experienced such argumentation patterns erschlichenen by context changes in the GWUP so frequently that I plan for the future to point out by a comprehensive analysis of texts of prominent representatives out of “Skeptiker” organizations in detail, how those persons use the “Skeptiker” – term depending upon context in different way and how this affects their conclusions. By the way, I have no doubt that this is done without reflection.

I do not see any a priori reason whatsoever for the assumption that “skeptical” in the first sense are automatically “skeptical” in the second sense (or vice versa) or even necessarily identical with “skeptical” in the third sense, but rather numerous proofs that this is not the case.

The demarcation of the subject area, to which the GWUP should be active, is a topic for itself. Syndrome skeptics tend to extend **(50)** the borders very far and also on religion and world view questions. This is only consistent, if one understands acting against Parawissenschaften as world view fight, as those “Skeptiker” often do. Then it is no longer necessary to consider which questions are actually still accessible to an empirical-scientific approach and which are not. In extreme cases, this struggle can even refer to “everything bad in the world”.

While some self-declared “skeptical” openly demand that also in questions of religion and world view the GWUP should refer clearly and militantly position, others recognize that this would be at least tactically unwise, since it would impair the credibility of the organization and probably cause

group-internal tensions (because the GWUP is not completely homogeneous in world-descriptive regard, although atheistic-naturalistic-scientific positions clearly dominate).

Consequently (51) for tactical (!) reasons the treatment of religion and world view questions is avoided and here a “division of labour” with other organizations (usually organized atheists) is aimed at or recommended. The managing director of the GWUP represents e.g. such an attitude, not differently also the CSICOP chairman Paul Kurtz.

(52) The possibility and/or probability that nevertheless still one of the phenomena rejected as “paranormal” could prove sometime as existing, is regarded – if this question is asked at all seriously – as going against zero, negligibly small and/or as purely hypothetically beyond all serious considerations.

Since it became clear to many members of the GWUP from various public controversies that one would appear with all too clear showing those subjective quasi absolute securities in a dogmatic light, such “Skeptiker” got accustomed in many cases to emphasize in the sense of a Rhetorik always their “fundamental openness” to let follow however hardly serious considerations.

A typical example is for instance an answer of the GWUP managing director Amardeo Sarma printed in GWUP current 1/98 to the question whether he considers it possible that so far as “paranormal” classified theses could prove once as true: I would be ready with appropriate situation of the things, such a fundamental paradigm change to take part in such a paradigm shift. But that this situation would come about would surprise me more than to learn that Karl Marx never lived and is an invention of Thomas Gottschalk”

The last sentence underlines on the one hand the absolute certainty of Sarma, on the other hand it fulfills the function of ridiculing (53) corresponding theses.

The more certain we are in our judgment, the more difficult it is, of course, for us to assess new data fairly. And this is precisely the problem of those “skeptics”. In addition, they are largely unfamiliar with relevant literature, as mentioned above, which is why, if the “state of affairs” were correct, they would certainly be among the last to recognize and implement such a “paradigm shift”, certainly well after the general scientific community itself.

However, this is a questionable situation for a society for the “scientific investigation of parascience”, which should be expected to have its heart very close to the current research and knowledge horizon and to play a pioneering role in communicating this to the scientific community and the public.

The fact that due to lack of knowledge that is not in such a way, has me opposite one the GWUP members of the board in a personal discussion also completely openly admitted – and with the argument defended that it is not at all the task of the GWUP to inform about the current research conditions but only about the conditions, under which one can accept such a “paradigm change” if necessary.

To what extent persons are particularly qualified to such Meta judgements, which have hardly connection to the respective research process and its specific problems, is left open.

The question of the extent to which typical “skeptical organizations” would be able to receive findings contradicting their “unbelief” system, apart from the lack of or at best very selective flow of relevant information in those organizations as well as the largely lacking controversial discussion culture on the scientific level, also raises doubts in another respect: For a whole series of those “skeptics” (54), to a certain extent the end justifies the means in the sense of their “fight against the paranormal”.

Repeatedly different members of the GWUP assured me that they regard also unobjective arguments (referring to emotions, cynicism among other things) as legitimate, in order to compete against the “Paranormale”. This can go up to the conscious concealment of possibly “disturbing” information.

On the occasion of a conference planned by the GWUP, to which on suggestion of Rudolf Henke and me also “pro” – representative (so one in the GWUP usual terminus technicus, which by the way already implies that the GWUP is always “contra”) should be invited as advisers, in order to lead a material and constructional dialogue, meant opposite me for example the managing director of the GWUP, Amardeo Sarma, one should not invite a certain adviser rather, since the study presented by it (which Sarma was not at all well-known at this time!) could possibly appear so good and so error free that the “skeptics” of the GWUP could not think of any more arguments against it.

Exactly the same Sarma demanded that pro-Contra-dialogues in the Skeptiker (which had been introduced by me and by it and other GWUP members with large distrust were seen, since they would endanger “the skeptical profile”) must be put on from the outset in such a way that the “skeptical side” sits at the longer lever, the conclusion has and as winners would stand.

Thus Sarma told me in an e-mail: “Controversial discussions are allowed if and only if it is in the interest of the skeptical reader or serves to convince readers who are not yet skeptical. In any case it must be ensured that ... a conclusion must always be drawn from a skeptical perspective. It should be prevented, even in each individual case, that doubts about the sceptic’s position arise”.

In which sense “skeptical” is meant here does not need to be further emphasized and is also made clear by the context of the mentioned intention “to convince” (of course with regard to the content positions).

For Sarma the target group for the magazine Skeptiker is exclusively “the skeptically adjusted person in the sense of the GWUP and/or persons, with whom we believe that we can convince it accordingly”. Definitely not to the target group belonged according to Sarma persons, “with whom rather not to assume is to be assumed they will change into the skeptical camp”. No concessions should be made to such persons, “which means that we cannot leave statements from e.g. parapsychologists unchallenged”. The readers might not be confused over the direction of the magazine, always and in each individual case is to be considered that the reader is not left in ambiguity over it, what the position is in the sense of the GWUP etc.

One may besides not the “myth of the mature reader”, so another member of the board. The editorship has to ensure thus always for the fact that only the “correct” opinions and information “in the sense of the GWUP” in the magazine appear and/or if at all deviating opinions appeared, then only and in given way commented.

One could ask oneself whether behind such a view not a due portion of distrust in relation to the “self-cleaning” process of the science as such as well as a remarkable disregard of the own readership regarding their critical thinking ability hides itself.

Such an attitude could be called **(55)** cui-bono thinking, which is another typical component of the skeptic syndrome: Decision criterion for the own acting is in the long run always the question “Who benefits from it? What is not accepted is the norm, which is appropriate from a scientific perspective, that, for example, at conferences or in publications, simply the person who has something relevant to say and can defend his or her position in a critical discourse with factual, well-founded arguments is given the floor – and not the person who has the “right” opinion, comes to the “right” results or belongs to the “right” group.

In public announcements, however, those “skeptics” present themselves quite differently. Sarma, for example, states in an article in Skeptiker 4/96: “The listeners are able to form their own opinion; therefore one should let the facts speak for themselves ... The goal of the GWUP is it not to have or get right but to come together as close as possible to the truth The discrepancy to the above mentioned internally represented positions of Sarma is obvious. Cui bono thinking is a central characteristic of the syndrome, however one, which appears for good reasons only in internal communication with assumed “Gleichgesinnten” openly.

Sarma had with such and similar me opposite internally raised demands however at least from a functional perspective surely not wrong, because different would apply, would stand after my estimate the GWUP indeed before an existence-endangering tear test, because the majority of the members would see then “profile” and “identity” of the GWUP fundamentally endangered. In last consequence the “skeptiker” organizations would disintegrate, because they live on this “kommunikativen locking”, without which their Ideologeme would crumble just like their social basis.

And for those who set their priorities differently and, in case of doubt, prefer scientific seriousness to the groups’ needs for self-affirmation, self-preservation and ideological positioning (according to Sarma in September 2002 in Prague at an international coordination meeting of “skeptical” functionaries): “It is fine to have such persons outside a skeptical organization and they sometimes correctly point out flawed reasoning among skeptics. It is within a skeptical group that they pose a real danger, because this position undermines the identification of skeptics with their skeptical group

I can only agree with this.

First publication: 1998

This release: 2019

Source: Skeptizismus.de (Archive)

© Dr. Edgar Wunder

Keywords: Skeptics, GWUP, Psiram, Wikipedia