

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Readers are invited to submit reviews of current literature relating to origins. Mailing address: ORIGINS, Geoscience Research Institute, 11060 Campus St., Loma Linda, California 92350 USA. The Institute does not distribute the publications reviewed; please contact the publisher directly.

SKEPTICISM AND TRUTH

THE SKEPTICAL INQUIRER. Quarterly Journal published by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Box 229. Central Park Station. Buffalo, NY 14215.

Reviewed by Ariel A. Roth, Geoscience Research Institute

The Skeptical Inquirer may be most easily described as being the opposite of its much larger counterpart, the popular weekly tabloid called the *National Enquirer*. While the latter reports on all kinds of oddities as truth, *The Skeptical Inquirer* is literally a debunking journal that reports oddities and unacceptable views as error. It is a small, interesting journal written in simple English that covers a great variety of subjects from worthless to extremely important, from scientific to religious, and from unpleasant to esthetic. One seldom knows what to expect next in this maverick periodical. Its general stance is to criticize those views which are not generally accepted by the scientific community or over which there is considerable disagreement. It favors naturalism, a belief that explains everything as simple cause and effect and thus rejects teleological explanations of nature. On occasion opposing views are given ample space for discussion, sometimes with well-voiced protest. Usually unacceptable views are criticized and destroyed.

The main sections of a typical issue are: news and comment, psychic vibrations (a criticism of paranormal claims), articles, literature reviews, and discussion and letters sections.

A number of topics tend to dominate and reappear from time to time. They include: extra sensory perception, coincidences, creationism, astrology, horoscopes, water-witching, clairvoyance, spiritualism, geocentric universe, flat earth, unidentified flying objects, biorhythms, the Loch Ness monster, the Bermuda Triangle, pyramid power, witchcraft, psychics, haunted houses, levitation, etc., etc. The journal generally strongly opposes all these views which are considered paranormal. To *The Skeptical Inquirer* the paranormal appears to be that which is not acceptable within a naturalistic philosophy. The journal claims accuracy and honesty, and

occasionally that goal appears to be reached. However, debunking is too often executed with dogmatism and scorn.

In this day and age when all kinds of cults, irrational beliefs and practices claim the attention of the public and indeed guide the lives of many, it seems appropriate to have a journal devoted to trying to help sort out the melee. In this journal a number of objective tests report on the uselessness of commonly accepted practices such as horoscopes and water-witching. In those areas which are amenable to good objective testing, the journal does seem to perform a useful purpose. When appropriate tests can be applied to questions raised, useful information can come forth. Within these limitations the journal is highly commendable.

However, the journal seems to present a confused picture of skepticism in that it is skeptical about most philosophical approaches while it openly accepts the philosophy of naturalism — a philosophy that excludes the supernatural. It is probably to be expected that many should feel a degree of comfort within a naturalistic system of thought, since this provides relatively easy and more tangible explanations. While these factors give support to naturalism, ease of testing and simplicity are not necessarily good criteria for truth. Reality is usually more complex than our simple minds envision. The many unexplainables that face us indicate that this is the case. In reading *The Skeptical Inquirer* one is intrigued by the “paranormal” behavior of those who can be so skeptical of some phenomena while they so openly accept other ideas.

The journal has not been successful in convincing this reviewer that it is fair in its skepticism about various ideas. In this respect its impact may be more to bolster the faith of the believer in naturalism than to convince a skeptic that here we have an objective evaluation of reality. For instance, why place without criticism a statement by the American Anthropological Association affirming evolution? It seems significant that *The Skeptical Inquirer* is not all that skeptical about the propriety of the American Anthropological Association as a spokesman for all of evolution. Physical anthropology with its frequently changing concepts of the assumed pattern of human evolution is prime turf for skepticism. Few areas of science have been subject to such continued major change and controversy. Thus, the skepticism of *The Skeptical Inquirer* appears selective.

The Skeptical Inquirer seems to disavow the skepticism most have that naturalism is the only reality. Most individuals object to being reduced to mere machines without design, purpose or destiny as naturalism proposes. This may be in part why millions more people read the *National Enquirer* than *The Skeptical Inquirer* which has a circulation of only a

few thousand. I hasten to add that, limited as it may be, I have more confidence in *The Skeptical Inquirer* than in the *National Enquirer*.

Skepticism is a concept that can be used to destroy itself. It is vulnerable to its own tenets. Carried to the extreme, skepticism leads to doubt about everything, including itself. This is both useless and philosophically unsatisfying. The goal of intellectual inquiry is truth, not skepticism, and there is a definite conflict between these two. In this respect there is tension between the terms “skeptical” and “inquirer” (not an unusual pattern in titles). Skepticism, when pursued to the extreme, tends away from truth, while inquiry tends to lead toward truth. In the case of *The Skeptical Inquirer*, skepticism usually dominates. The conflict between skepticism and truth has been resolved by taking a reductionist approach and accepting naturalism as the only reality. There is room in our search for truth for skepticism, but there also needs to be room for truth. As one who believes that there is an absolute reality, an absolute truth to be found, I am particularly concerned that room be made for this rare commodity.

The Skeptical Inquirer has been very useful in eliminating some commonly held misinformation. That it has helped in solving the more basic question of how to arrive at truth is doubtful. Its stance, which tends to reduce reality to a naturalistic understanding, is an intellectual pose that can be misleading. Thus far it has failed to address itself seriously to skepticism about a naturalistic philosophy, thus fostering an unbalanced approach to the truth question. It is a useful journal, however, only if one is aware of its bias. Because of this, skepticism about *The Skeptical Inquirer* is warranted.