

## The Pathology of Organized Skepticism

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**Abstract**—Experience of interacting with an organized Skeptics' group suggests an hypothesis that may explain what produces avowed Skeptics.

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At the outset it is important to clarify a basic difference, the difference between ordinary (individual) skepticism and organized skepticism. This paper does not take issue with ordinary skepticism, which is seen as a useful and important human trait, the ability to recognize that any claim or theory, no matter how well established or authoritatively propounded, may turn out to be wrong. In everyday life, ordinary skepticism helps to protect people from being fooled, duped, and manipulated. Ordinary skepticism is also an important scientific tool, especially when it is liberally applied to one's own work. That effort sometimes, but not often, may preempt pointed skepticism from one's colleagues and peers.

Owing to the nature of their work, many members of the Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE) are quite used to dealing with skepticism. Ordinary skepticism acts to refine and improve scientific inquiry. Dealing with it, while normally difficult, is ultimately beneficial to both scientist and skeptical reviewer alike. However, organized skepticism appears to be something very different: it might be called, in the words of Ed Storms<sup>1</sup>, *pathological* skepticism; or in the words of Marcello Truzzi<sup>2</sup>, *pseudoskepticism*.

For about 5 years now, I have been actively engaged with a local Skeptics' organization in the Delaware Valley of Pennsylvania. It is the "Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking", better known by its acronym "PhACT". An old and dear friend, then a member of both CSICOP and PhACT, introduced me to PhACT. Thankfully, he recently left CSICOP in protest over specific non-professional behavior on their part, a seemingly frequent complaint of former CSICOPers. Happily, partially due to the professional stature of other scientists (like himself) in SSE, he has recently joined our own excellent, important Society. However, he remains a member of PhACT, and of "The Skeptics Society" on the west coast. I continue to try to pry him away from membership in both organizations. Perhaps this paper will have some further beneficial effect on him.

As a long-time member of SSE, it would have been a blatant personal hypocrisy for me to become a member of PhACT, since in no way can I support their organization's goals, both formal and *de facto*. However, I have continuously subscribed to their newsletter, *Phactum*, and have attended most of their monthly, free, public lectures, and other social events, for a somewhat covert reason: they fascinate me as a subject of study, both as individuals and as an organization. Recently, I have voluntarily and publicly "blown my cover" with them, and advised them that this paper was coming. I felt it only fair to give them some warning, but did not disclose this paper's central premise.

One of my earliest formal interactions with PhACT was an invited address that I made at one of their meetings entitled "Skeptical about Skeptics". That alone should have put them on notice. There was one especially significant after-effect of my address. The then editor of their newsletter, *Phactum*, wrote a review of my address in a subsequent edition of that newsletter. It was not scathing, but was certainly studded with ridicule, a behavior that I had pointedly cautioned PhACT's membership against in the beginning of my address, based on my own previous observations of them as a group. Subsequently, this editor adamantly refused to publish my formal response to his review, an action on his part which was not especially surprising, but nevertheless, regrettable.

During this same time-period, I advised a certain long-time member of SSE of my ongoing engagement with PhACT. His supportive counsel to me was to immediately disengage from them, since pursuing the relationship would be, he thought, a fruitless, wasteful exercise. This was well-intentioned advice on his part. However, if I had followed it, there would be no basis for this paper.

PhACT members and members of other Skeptics' organizations seem to wear their skeptical persuasion as a badge of honor, as self-proclaimed protectors of the rational and the scientific. However, it is hard to understand why anyone would willingly (or worse, proudly) wish to be known as a "Skeptic", which is to say an *organized* (pathological, *pseudo*) skeptic. From my standpoint, that labels an individual as someone whose mental processes are continually and rigidly out of balance, in the direction of disbelief. I would no more wish to be known as such a Skeptic, than I would wish to be known as a dupe, the opposite extreme, i.e. someone who is extremely gullible. For me, the most desirable mind-set is exactly in the center of these two extremes, in a middle ground I would call rational balance.

That middle ground is where true science thrives. Where the willingness to follow the data wherever they lead is balanced by the rigor to properly collect, analyze, and report those data, and what they appear to indicate. This middle ground is the natural habitat of SSE.

The members of PhACT, as a class of people, share a number of characteristics with SSE members. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, the friend who introduced me to PhACT, a Ph.D. and a professional scientist, is currently a member of both organizations. Like him, there are several other Ph.D.s, professors, and professional scientists who are PhACT members, certainly not the same

percentage to be found in SSE, but significant nevertheless. In addition, as with SSE, there is a heavy concentration of engineers, medical professionals, teachers, etc. Also as a class, as might be expected from the foregoing, they generally exhibit superior intelligence (several are MENSA members), formal education well above the norm, as well as strong speaking, writing, and technical skills.

For me, that similarity in intellectual and educational level with SSE members, coupled with an almost diametrical difference in philosophy between the two groups, is what is so fascinating about PhACT's membership. SSE members, as the Society's name implies, tend to be determined scientific explorers, despite all the well-known risks involved. PhACT members and, I suspect, members of all skeptical organizations, have an obvious and well-known bias toward disbelief. As a result, they seem to be far more comfortable on the trailing edge of scientific progress than on the leading edge. Why?

I may have detected the reason, but only because I have continuously and closely observed and engaged so many of PhACT's members. Sometimes that engagement has been adversarial and, thankfully, sometimes collegial, but mostly neutral. The theme that has emerged time after time, as I become closely acquainted with individual PhACT members is this: Each one who has disclosed personal details of their formative years, say up until their early 20's, has had an unfortunate experience with a *faith-based* philosophy, most often a conventional major religion.

Very often, their family or community has (almost forcibly) imposed this philosophy on them from a very early age; but then as they matured, they threw off this philosophy with a vengeance, vowing at a soul level never to be so victimized again. Less often, it appears that they have instead voluntarily and enthusiastically embraced, for example, a New Age cult, or have become say, a born-again Christian. Then after a few years, they become convinced of the folly of that infatuation with the same basic result. They throw off this philosophy with a vengeance, vowing at a soul level never to be so victimized again.

A person who has been duped frequently in everyday life might learn by bitter experience to be cautious and wary. The reaction of those who have joined PhACT is however more dysfunctional. They have been wounded at a deeper level, to the extent that what was purported to be a valid philosophy of life, and in which they were heavily involved, turns out to be empty and useless, even damaging, in their eyes. Thus, they gravitate to what appears to them to be the ultimate *non-faith-based* philosophy, Science. Unfortunately, while they loudly proclaim their righteousness, based on their professed adherence to "hard science", they do so with the one thing no true scientist can afford to possess, a closed mind. Instead of becoming scientifically minded, they become adherents of *scientism*, the belief system in which science and only science has all the answers to everything. This regrettable condition acts to preclude their unbiased *consideration* of phenomena on the cutting edge of

science, which is not how a true scientist should behave. In fact, many “Skeptics” will not even read significantly into the literature on the subjects about which they are most skeptical. I have direct experience with this specific behavior on the part of a number of PhACT members. Initially, I attributed that behavior to just plain laziness, but lately I’ve begun to suspect that those individuals may actually have a *phobia* about reading material that is contrary to their own views. It seems entirely possible that they fear “contamination” from that exposure will eventually lead to (Gasp!) acceptance of the opposition’s position. Such scientifically inclined, but psychologically scarred people tend to join Skeptics’ organizations much as one might join any other support group, say, Alcoholics Anonymous. There they find comfort, consolation, and support amongst their own kind.

Anyone who has spent much time engaging members of Skeptics’ organizations knows about their strong inclination toward ridicule and *ad hominem* criticism of those with differing viewpoints. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many members of PhACT have been rather offended by my position as someone who is skeptical of Skeptics. As the old adage states, “They can dish it out, but they can’t take it.”

I have found PhACT and its membership to be fascinating and intriguing subjects of study. I truly like many of its members as people. I just feel very sorry for them, and where possible, I have tried to woo the best and the brightest away to membership in SSE, as I have with my old friend.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cited by S. R. Chubb, Introduction to the special series of papers... dealing with ‘cold fusion’. In *Accountability in Research: Policies and Quality Assurance* (ISSN 0898-9621), vol. 8, nos. 1 and 2 (pp. 1–17), 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Marcello Truzzi, Editorial, *Zetetic Scholar*, 12–13 (1987) 3–4; posted on the Anomalist web site at <http://www.anomalist.com/commentaries/pseudo.html>.