

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-75893-2 - Beyond Belief: Skepticism, Science and the Paranormal

Martin Bridgstock

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# Beyond Belief

Skepticism, science and the paranormal

Whether ghosts, astrology or ESP, up to 80 per cent of the population believes in one or more aspects of the paranormal. Such beliefs are entertaining, and it is tempting to think of them as harmless. However, there is mounting evidence that paranormal beliefs can be dangerous – cases of children dying because parents favoured alternative remedies over conventional medicine, and ‘psychics’ who trade on the grief of the bereaved for personal profit and gain. Expenditure on the paranormal runs into billions of dollars each year.

In *Beyond Belief: Skepticism, science and the paranormal* Martin Bridgstock provides an integrated understanding of what an evidence-based approach to the paranormal – a skeptical approach – involves, and why it is necessary. Bridgstock does not set out to show that all paranormal claims are necessarily false, but he does suggest that we all need the analytical ability and critical thinking skills to seek and assess the evidence for paranormal claims.

**Martin Bridgstock** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Biomolecular and Physical Sciences at Griffith University, Queensland.

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*For  
my parents,  
Connie and Roy,  
with love and gratitude*

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## Preface

THIS BOOK HAS its genesis in a lengthy period I spent in hospital in 2001. The illness was painful – and I had a near-death experience – but as I recovered, I spent weeks reviewing my own life and the inevitable coming of my own demise. So, I asked myself, what did I want to do with the time that was left? Experiences of this kind are common among middle-aged men, and can lead to monumentally foolish decisions. I claim no special wisdom, but my change of course seems to have been completely beneficial.

I had acquired a great deal of respect for the skeptical movement, especially in the way it had helped stop the creation scientists from infiltrating education in my home state of Queensland, and so I conceived the idea of a course in skepticism at Griffith University. On being released from hospital I began to plan such a course. To my surprise, no one at the university objected to such a radical change in my teaching. When it was taught, the course was a great success. Numbers rapidly rose to unprecedented heights and the enthusiasm and involvement of the students was greater than I had ever witnessed.

There were some reasonable books in the area, I found, but none which quite fitted the course. I decided to do things the hard way and write my own. I was greatly helped in this by study leave from Griffith University in 2005. I spent part of this at the Centre for the Study of Social Change at Queensland University of Technology and the rest at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne. I am grateful to all these institutions.

The Introduction contains data from a survey obtained by the Australian Skeptics Science and Education Foundation from the Queensland Social

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Survey at Central Queensland University (Hanley & Mummery 2008). I am grateful to the Foundation for their assistance and to the Survey staff for their efficiency and helpfulness. The Cambridge University Press staff were enthusiastic and efficient, and I also appreciated the perceptive comments of the two anonymous reviewers.

Writing the book itself was reasonably easy: I had developed the main ideas in the course, and putting them on paper was a logical next step. Re-writing the book, making the ideas clear, avoiding repetition and self-contradiction, was much harder, and took years. My beloved family, my wife Vicki and daughters Sundari and Suji, have been understanding of what is needed, and I am grateful to them, in addition to all else. I also appreciate John Elliott’s assistance regarding publication.

I must also thank the hundreds of students I have faced in the lecture theatre. The mass of waving hands raising points, the questions in the intervals, the excited emails have all convinced me that universities can and should be much more than efficient factories for training the workforce. The academic fire can still be passed from generation to generation, and I hope this book will play a part.

This book is primarily a work of advocacy. It outlines a method of thinking and argues that humanity would be better off if all of us adopted this method. It also strongly and explicitly links skeptical thinking to ethical thinking. I do believe the book has a number of novel features as well. Of course, the data in the Introduction are completely new. While the model of science outlined in the early chapters is implied in any number of philosophical texts, to my knowledge, the material has never been explicitly presented like this. The strong and explicit link between skepticism and ethics is also novel, though other writers have hinted at it. Nor, to my knowledge, has anyone placed the three principles (burden of proof, Occam’s razor and Sagan’s balance) at the heart of skepticism, as I have done here.

Some readers may be irritated by my spelling of ‘skepticism’. I am following the precedent set by the Australian Skeptics for several decades, and also drawing attention to my focus upon the modern skeptical movement, which is primarily concerned with the investigation of paranormal claims. The uncommon spelling distinguishes modern skepticism from a somewhat different tradition reaching back thousands of years.

My innovations may be wrong, and I am happy to receive criticism. I do believe, however, that the book presents a clear and cogent case for

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the adoption of skeptical ways of thinking, and also spells out exactly how enjoyable it is. I hope that readers come to the same conclusion.

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