

ESSAY REVIEW

Strange Beliefs and Why They Are Believed

The Unpersuadables: Adventures with the Enemies of Science by Will Storr. New York: Overlook Press, 2014. 355 pp. \$27.95 (hardcover), \$16.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4683-0818-1.

Scientific Explorers might interpret this title¹ as just another Pseudo-Skeptical² debunking of anomalistics. It is not that at all, though it begins like that with a rather jocular treatment of a creationist.

I found interesting descriptions of some truly extraordinary beliefs and practices, and enjoyed much of what is said about Skeptics (and Randi in particular); on the other hand, many sections are quite naïve or misinformed about science and human behavior, and the book concludes without pointing to any significant lesson learned.

The continuing theme seems to be: How and why do people hold strange beliefs, or false beliefs? The trouble is that Storr never defines what makes a belief strange or what makes it false; though implicitly he seems to regard as strange any belief that seems strange to him, and as false any belief that contemporary science does not propound. Nor does the book ever suggest an answer to that large and ill-defined question. There is a great deal about humans being governed by emotion and not thought, by the unconscious and not the conscious mind, which might seem to be at least a partial answer—except that these lengthy disquisitions on emotion and the unconscious have the same effect as extreme relativism from philosophers and sociologists: If everything we “think” is determined by genes, emotions, nerve impulses, and neurotransmitters, then why should we pay any attention to anything anyone says, including Storr?

Perhaps we shouldn't: Storr himself at various places says that he knows that he might be wrong. Unfortunately he never specifies in which way or over what. He reveals much about himself, including his inability to remain friends with someone who believed the USA should invade Iran, or with a Jewish (former) friend after the latter confessed herself unwilling to share a taxi with an Arab (p. 9); thereby he certainly exemplifies the triumph of unfettered emotion over judicious thought. Storr is also disarmingly honest in admitting that he listens to Richard Dawkins because of his scientific credentials and because he shares the same beliefs (p. 10).

All this would make Storr a doubtfully reliable guide. Moreover, he disclaims any knowledge of science, and seems to illustrate that in appearing not to have known that humans did not evolve from anything like present-day chimps but from mutual ancestors (p. 19); or in asserting that science is “predicated” on materialism (p. 256), apparently unaware of the hordes of religious believers who also do science. One wonders whether he is serious in writing, “We are agents of reason. Everything we know about people tells us this is so” (p. 67). Everything I have learned about people tells me it is *not* so, and large sections of this book assert that it is not so. It is also difficult to believe that Storr was ever as naïve about love and marriage as he reports having been in his mid-twenties (pp. 133–134).

Nevertheless, this book has something of interest for anyone and some things of interest particularly to anomalists. For instance, Storr illustrates the common tendency for people who change beliefs to do so from one extreme to the other (Leiter 2002): the creationist had been raised in an anti-Christian house, the evolutionist by fundamentalist Christians (p. 19). Storr himself rebelled against a Catholic upbringing (p. 21).

Chapter 2 begins with a couple of believers in the more extreme notions about UFOs, but then has a not-unsympathetic section about John Mack and his despicable treatment by his colleagues and by Harvard University. Chapter 3 debunks an Indian guru who claims that breathing correctly—pranayama—can cure all ills. That some individuals attest to having been cured leads to a brief consideration of placebo, a phenomenon that apparently came as a surprise to Storr. He describes Beecher’s classic 1955 study (Beecher 1955) as “at best, highly careless,” but “it would go on to affect the practice of medicine forever” (p. 41). Really?

Storr experiences past-life regression in Sydney, spends a miserable 10 days at the Vipassana Meditation Centre, and then describes a notorious hoax in which phone calls lead to humiliation of a female employee (pp. 68–69), leading into mention of the Stanford Prison Experiment and Stanley Milgram’s study at Yale, which supposedly demonstrate that ordinary people can behave very badly when ordered to do so (p. 69 ff.). A lengthy Chapter 6 then again asserts that we cannot control our own cognition, that our brains are structured so that we *construct* reality and we cannot glimpse the real thing.

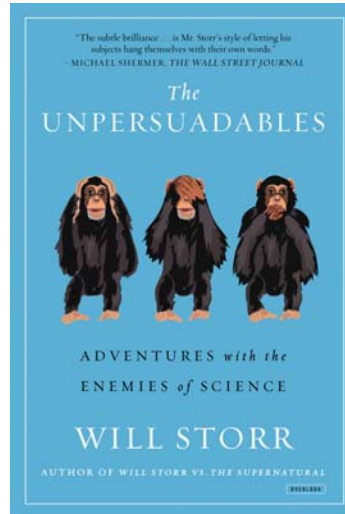
Chapter 7 begins with the story of a woman apparently cured of brain tumors by homeopathic pills. Then the book shifts from recounting strange and presumably false beliefs to an unflattering description of the Manchester “Skeptics in the Pub,” whose “main hobby seems to be not believing in things. Psychics, homeopathy, chiropractic, God” (p. 96). An editor of *Skeptic* sees the responsibility of Skeptics as “safe-guarders of

the truth” who “are never wrong” (p. 98). Randi’s Million Dollar Challenge is cited as failed or evaded by “high-profile Greek homeopath . . . George Vithoulkas” (p. 99); but toward the end of the book (p. 277 ff.) Storr reveals that it might actually have been Randi and not Vithoulkas who reneged from the trial of homeopathy. Skeptics further surprise Storr as “so few of these disciples of empirical evidence seem to be familiar with the scientific literature on the subject that impassions them so” (p. 104). Amen!

Chapter 8 describes a medical self-delusion I had not heard of before; and reminds us that doctors cannot always help patients with unwanted physical sensations. Chapter 9 follows fairly naturally, about people who hear voices, and whether or not this constitutes certifiable illness; the dubious validity of psychiatric diagnosis is mentioned.³ In connection with a woman’s imaginary friend, Storr fails to mention that this is a quite common experience among youngsters—“Many young children (about 65 percent) develop imaginary friends between the ages of 3 and 5” (Gurian no date). A psychiatrist’s comment (p. 156) that “about twenty to thirty per cent of what we think are real memories are probably false”⁴ leads into Chapter 10, largely a horror story about a young woman who may have died through “recovery” of false memories; but an optimistic note is struck when official psychiatry in 2000 described as “important” an approach to hearing voices that in 1994 it had described as “dangerous” (p. 162).

If the book’s title is taken seriously, then among the unpersuadable enemies of science must be counted the one-time “Head of Ethics, Science, and Information for the British Medical Association” (p. 162) and psychiatrists such as Valerie Sinason (p. 171 ff.) who treat multiple personality disorder in which recovery of (false) memories can play a part and who take seriously their patients’ accounts of Satanism, child abuse, and cannibalism. Sinason’s rationale for believing the truthfulness of these accounts is like that offered by some investigators of UFO abductions: So many people give “ludicrously similar testimony” (p. 179).

Chapter 11 once more harps on the fallibility of the human mind, confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance, and so on. This is marred by gross overstating such as “We can’t question ourselves”; most thinking is



emotional, and we are not aware of it (p. 188). I beg to differ. Introspection, not to speak of psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, does enable us to become aware of our emotions and prejudices. Jack Good may have been unique in managing his thinking along Bayesian lines of probability, but large swaths of at least some societies have managed to harness reason and evidence over the centuries to discard laws and practices based purely on ignorance and bias—say about slavery, miscegenation, homosexuality.

Chapter 12 lampoons “the famous climate-change sceptic Lord Monckton” (p. 200) and his “explosively heretical defiance of the scientific establishment’s now inarguable case for the dangers and reality of man-made climate change” (p. 203). Here Storr exemplifies what he criticized about Sceptics: He is being dogmatic on a topic about which he is personally ignorant. There is nothing inarguable about the case for human-caused climate change (Bauer 2012: 18 ff. and *passim*). Here Storr also cites the claim that political attitudes are heavily influenced (one-third to one half) by genetic heredity (p. 205), following not quite accurately Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind*.⁵ Monckton’s take on Bill Gates will likely appeal to some who think Gates holds forth pedantically about some matters of which he knows little, say education (p. 212).

Chapter 13 harpoons and lampoons David Irving, “Hitler’s ambassador . . . [and] notorious right wing historian” (p. 219) and a number of Storr’s companions on an Irving-led tour of WWII sites including concentration camps. But if the book’s long discourses are correct, about how our thoughts and beliefs are not ours to choose, should Storr not be pitying or empathizing with these and other victims of false and strange beliefs instead of lampooning and harpooning? After all, “intelligence simply *does not work* in the service of truth” (p. 244, emphasis in original). That extraordinary claim cites a study of views on “socio-political issues,” which are not issues of truth or untruth but of values and preferences. Storr’s castigating of Irving is such that it almost made me sympathize with this befuddled Holocaust-minimizer.

Chapter 14 deals badly also with Rupert Sheldrake and parapsychology. But then Chapter 15 deals very unkindly with James Randi, whose “boosters are known for their cautious and critical evidence-based thinking” (p. 271); one wishes Storr’s tongue was firmly in cheek when he wrote that. In citing Randi’s record of self-contradictions and ethical lapses, Storr fails to mention the infamous occasion when Randi trained a couple of lads to deliberately sabotage parapsychological research (“Project Alpha”).⁶

Cohorts of Randi also are mentioned here, for instance “Skeptic celebrity Dr. Steven Novella . . . [asserts that] skepticism is incompatible with dogma and ideology . . . [because] it’s very anti-dogmatic and anti-

ideological at its core” (p. 272)—to which Robbie Burns (1786) might respond, “O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us, To see oursels as ithers see us.” Bartenders become excellent judges of personality, like the one cited here by Storr: “Skeptics. They’re like conspiracy theorists” (p. 291).

So this book offers points of interest as well as some disappointments. Storr disappoints by not grappling consistently or thoughtfully with his major question, about the origin of strange beliefs. He confesses fallibility, but doesn’t proceed to think about how it is that humans collectively have managed to attain quite a lot of empirically and demonstrably non-false understanding. He regards as counterintuitive the fact that intelligence is no protection against strange beliefs, something I imagine most Scientific Explorers learned early in their ventures into anomalistics; and he imagined that “simple facts and basic logic” should suffice to disabuse creationist belief (p. 26).

It seems to me fairly obvious that the question to ask is not how some people can succumb to strange beliefs, but how some people manage to align their beliefs with sound evidence (Bauer 1984:185). If sociobiology has any insights to offer, surely one of them is that all living things, at least from birds and mammals on, learn unequivocally from their parents and other nurturers. Birds show their offspring how to fly and how to get food; over many summers at Loch Ness, I watched young ducks being taken on what were obviously training runs. Humans are no different: We rely on our parents for everything, for years, because we have no choice about it; so naturally we acquire our parents’ beliefs, and changing them later appears not to be easy and may even be traumatic, as when belief then swings to the opposite extreme. The wonder is not that people have strange beliefs or false beliefs, the wonder is that some people some of the time manage to align some of their beliefs with evidence.

Notes

- ¹ First published in the UK by Picador, 2013, as *The Heretics: Adventures with the Enemies of Science*.
- ² Marcello Truzzi pointed out that self-styled “Skeptics” are actually not at all skeptical about mainstream science and should therefore be described as pseudo-skeptical.
<http://www.anomalist.com/commentaries/pseudo.html>
- ³ For much more about lack of validity of psychiatric diagnosis, see my reviews of *Saving Normal* and *The Book of Woe* (*Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 29(1) [2015] 142–148) and *Manufacturing Depression* (*Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 29(2), 354–361 [this issue]).
- ⁴ One of my most gratifying moments as an author came when a colleague

told me he remembered exactly the people and events in a story in my Dean's memoirs (Bauer 1988)—a story I had created from stereotypes and not from actual people or events. My colleague illustrated how false memories can be even when we experience them as genuine.

⁵ See review in *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 26 [2012], 719–720.

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/02/15/science/magician-s-effort-to-debunk-scientists-raises-ethical-issues.html>

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