

COMMENTARY

**On Elephants and Matters Epistemological:
Reply to Etzel Cardeña’s Guest Editorial
“On Wolverines and Epistemological Totalitarianism”**

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The Guest Editorial *On Wolverines and Epistemological Totalitarianism* by Etzel Cardeña (*JSE* 24(3), Fall 2011) is little more than a rant, in which invective, ridicule, and mockery take the place of reasoned argumentation. Mind you, there’s nothing wrong with a good rant, especially when one agrees with the overall perspective, and I actually found myself in agreement with much of what the author had to say. Most of Cardeña’s anger is directed at those Materialist philosophers and psychologists who happily pontificate against the possibility of psi while remaining studiously ignorant of the data that parapsychological research has uncovered. I think everyone who comes to parapsychology with an open mind at some point experiences the same frustration that Cardeña expresses toward Materialist idealogues, whose conclusions and opinions have been formed a priori and appear to be impervious to empirical data. But he seems equally upset with those who are “pro-psi,” lamenting

the epistemological absolutism that pervades both the strident anti-psi and pro-psi proponents from what I consider a healthy abeyance from fully committing to a closed position in science or in other aspects of life. (Cardeña, p. 539)

Cardeña singles me out as a pro-psi proponent (a charge which I proudly acknowledge), then proceeds to misrepresent my views, quote me out of context, and hold up what he has quoted for ridicule and contempt. In thinking about whether and how I should respond, I believe I have come across, not a wolverine, but rather an elephant, an epistemological elephant, in our parapsychological living room. The main purpose of this Reply is to bring attention to this elephant, in the hope that it will lead to fruitful discussion across differing epistemic perspectives.

In what follows, I shall use the expression “the data” to refer to empirical data collected by parapsychologists and survival researchers over the past 130 years. The term “evidence” is a relational term, and is used in conjunction with a specific hypothesis for which the data are alleged to be evidence. The specific hypothesis for which the data are taken to be evidence in this case can be and has been formulated in many different ways: (i) Materialism is false, (ii) consciousness is not produced by the brain, (iii) the mind can acquire information that is not mediated by the body’s sensory channels, (iv) the consciousness that constitutes our self continues after the death of the body. Although we may quibble over this, I take these to be roughly equivalent formulations of the same underlying hypothesis. Perhaps we can agree to use William James’ formulation: The brain is a transmitter, not a producer, of consciousness.

The epistemological question here is how strong is the data as evidence for our hypothesis, or, to shorten it, how good is the evidence? From a logical perspective, there are three possible points of view, corresponding to the logical quantifiers: (1) no, (2) some, and (3) all.

(1) The data does not constitute any evidence (against Materialism) at all. This is the perspective of Materialist ideologues, who usually reach this conclusion without examining the data, then project their conclusion onto whatever data, if any, they examine. This is what frustrates Cardeña the most, and I agree.

(2) The collective data constitute some evidence against Materialism, but it is hardly conclusive, and much more research is needed. I believe that this is the epistemological perspective of most practicing parapsychologists, including Cardeña.

But some scientists and philosophers, who have studied the data, have concluded that (3) the data as they now stands is sufficiently strong to conclude that James’ hypothesis is correct. More data are of course always welcome, but the data already obtained is evidentially sufficiently strong to assert that Materialism is false.

Now for decades our efforts have been rightly directed against the deniers (1) . . . those who deny that the data constitute any evidence against Materialism. That is, those who belong to the (2)nd and (3)rd epistemological perspectives have been so united in our efforts against the Materialist ideologues, that we have perhaps failed to notice the major epistemological differences among ourselves. This is the elephant in our living room.

Cardeña’s off-the-wall ridicule of me began to make some sense to me when I tried to see how things look to someone who is committed to the (2)nd epistemological perspective. In the next two paragraphs I will try to examine how each perspective looks from the vantage point of the other perspective.

So let us suppose, as Cardeña does, that we believe the (2)nd perspective

to be the correct one. We believe that the evidence is sufficiently strong to justify further research, but not sufficiently strong to assert that Materialism has already been falsified by science. What must we now say about someone who belongs to the (3)rd perspective, who believes that the evidence as it now stands is sufficiently strong to declare, as a finding of science, that James is correct in his belief that consciousness is not produced by the brain. Well, according to this epistemological position the data are only “suggestive,” but by no means conclusive. So anyone who has concluded that Materialism is false, that the brain does not produce consciousness, etc., cannot have reached this conclusion on the basis of scientific data and reasoning alone. Something must be added to the data to reach this conclusion. What is this something? What else but the usual suspects: wishful thinking, sloppy reasoning, dogmatic suppression of alternative theories, and so forth. Cardeña compares those who believe that the evidence is conclusive with the “person in a New Age fair trading in everything from magical rocks to mysterious odors” (p. 539). And this is how it must seem from within this epistemological perspective. Cardeña cannot even acknowledge that this (3)rd perspective exists, and lumps those of us who have concluded that the evidence warrants our strong conclusion together with starry-eyed crystal gazers. Speaking of epistemological totalitarianism. Wow!

Now, fair is fair, and it is about time someone tried to describe how the (2)nd epistemological perspective looks from the vantage point of the (3)rd perspective. We have perhaps a psychological advantage, in that most of us . . . those of us in the (3)rd perspective . . . have come to that perspective by way of the (2)nd perspective, so we know what that perspective feels like. But from the point of view of this (3)rd perspective, it seems that those in the (2)nd perspective are just sitting on the fence, are excessively fond of hair-splitting, can’t see the forest for the trees, are not familiar with all the relevant data, or have emotional issues (such as fear of ridicule from dogmatists in the first two epistemological perspectives).

In referring to Cardeña as a dogmatist, I am in a way accusing him of espousing the very epistemological totalitarianism that he rails against. For he takes the (2)nd epistemological perspective, his own, to be absolute. In the passage quoted above he advocates “a healthy abeyance from fully committing to a closed position in science.” This appears to be an open-minded statement about always being open to alternative hypotheses and new ideas in science. But this, as an epistemological rule, precludes that science could ever reach a conclusion about anything. Science has, as a matter of fact, arrived at a “closed position” about many things that at one time were open questions: Does Cardeña recommend a “healthy abeyance” from “fully committing” to such things as (i) global warming, (ii) cigarette smoke causing cancer, (iii) the heliocentric theory, and (iv) the age of the Earth. I can readily imagine a fundamentalist agreeing with

Cardeña, that we should maintain a “healthy abeyance from fully committing to a closed position in science,” and that Creationist theories should be taught in our schools along with geology. The truth of the matter is that sometimes science does reach a conclusion, in which case it is unscientific to keep sitting on the fence, always demanding more and more evidence, and then, just like our Materialist friends, moving the goalpost whenever such evidence seems to be forthcoming.

I would now like to examine a specific passage in which Cardeña quotes me out of context, then seriously distorts and misrepresents my actual views. Here is the passage:

On the other side, we have the milder contempt of Grossman stating that whoever holds a Materialist perspective is not “a responsible investigator” and is dogmatic and “irrational.” He also stated that those who succeed academically do so not on the grounds of “talent, but mostly on competition, self-promotion, and so forth.” He also implies that anyone disagreeing with his conclusion has not accepted the primacy of love. (Cardeña, p. 544)

Cardeña’s last sentence here is so outrageous that I will not dignify it with a reply. But let’s take a look at the first sentence. All of Cardeña’s quotes from my work are taken from a Foreword I wrote to Chris Carter’s book, *Science and the Near-Death Experience*. In the Foreword, I had quoted the following passage from Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso, & Greyson (2007:421):

. . . the central challenge of NDEs (Near-Death Experiences) lies in asking how these complex states of consciousness, including vivid mentation, sensory perception, and memory, can occur under conditions in which current neurophysiologic models of the production of mind by brain deem such states impossible. This conflict between current neuroscientific orthodoxy and the occurrence of NDEs under conditions of general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest is head-on, profound, and inescapable. In our opinion, no future scientific or philosophic discussion of the mind–brain problem can be fully responsible, intellectually, without taking these challenging data into account. (Grossman, 2010)

The relevant word in this quote is “responsible.” In my Foreword, I expressed agreement with Kelly et al. that it is not responsible for a philosopher or psychologist to discuss the mind/brain problem while being studiously ignorant of the data from parapsychology, especially the near-death experience. Here is what I wrote:

Given that there is a large body of empirical data that (i) is highly relevant to this question and (ii) has convinced virtually everyone that has taken the time to examine it that Materialism cannot explain it, I find myself agreeing with

Kelly, Grosso, and Greyson that it is intellectually irresponsible for a philosopher or psychologist to be ignorant of this data. (Grossman, 2010:xii)

Those who have read Cardeña's Guest Editorial will know that this sentence is in complete agreement with everything Cardeña has to say regarding our Materialist colleagues who refuse to look at the data. Yet when I say it, I am expressing "contempt."

Perhaps I crossed a line here by using the word *love*, and perhaps it was the use of this word that, in Cardeña's mind, triggered an association with New Age Fluff. But my Foreword was to a book on the near-death experience, and the concept of unconditional love plays an indispensable role to everyone who has had an NDE. It is well-documented that one of the main difficulties, perhaps "the" main difficulty that NDErs have, is in returning to a world that is not organized around the principles of unconditional love that they experience in their NDE. This "unconditional love" business is something that those of us in the (3)rd epistemological category are obliged to take very seriously. If we are convinced that the NDE is real (this does not apply to the inhabitants of the (2)nd epistemological category), and if we are concerned to understand the nature of this consciousness that we now know is a fundamental existent, and if we wish to remain empirical in our undertakings, then it is incumbent upon us to seriously examine the testimony of those who have experienced consciousness in itself, independent of the body: mystics and NDErs. They all speak to the issue of Love, and validate Ken Ring's suggestion that the Golden Rule is how we are supposed to live our lives.

This forces one to think about the meaning of the Golden Rule in an entirely new way. Most of us are accustomed to regard it mainly as a precept for moral action. . . . But in the light of these life review commentaries, the Golden Rule is much more than that—it is *actually the way it works*. Familiar exhortations, such as "Love your Brother as Yourself" from this point of view are understood to mean that in the life review, you *are* your brother you have been urged to love. And this is no mere intellectual conviction or even a religious credo—it is an *undeniable fact of your lived experience*. (Ring, 1998:161–162)

And in a passage cited approvingly by two famous parapsychologists writing 110 years apart, psychiatrist Richard Bucke, describing his mystical experience, states

I did not merely come to believe, but I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life. . . . I saw that all men are immortal; that the cosmic order is such that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds, is what we call love. . . . (James, 1994:435; also Tart, 2010:330)

So I think it is incumbent on those of us who are in what I called the (3)rd epistemological category to follow the argument where it leads, to take Love seriously, and to apply these “Lessons from the Light” to both our personal lives and the institutions of our culture. If, as Bucke states, Love is the foundation principle of the world, then there can be no theoretical understanding of the nature of consciousness that does not involve the concept of love. My suggestion here is that the social and cultural forces that make it difficult for an NDEr to return are the same cultural forces that make it difficult to do this research in a university setting. I understand that it is not proper form to use the four-letter word *love* in an academic context. But in times of major paradigm change, and this is such a time, everything should be open for question. Why is it the case that talking about love in an academic context is taboo? What might be the vested interests that are threatened by such talk? This is a conversation that we must have, at some point.

Let me close with a little story. Perhaps the most egregious example of what Cardeña calls “epistemological totalitarianism” was committed by philosopher Robert Almeder. In the first chapter of his book *Death and Personal Survival*, he spends sixty pages or so examining some of the stronger cases of the reincarnational type (CORT), including every alternative hypothesis that has been put forth to explain the data. He concludes by saying that, given the evidence, “it is unreasonable to reject belief in reincarnation.” This is very blunt language. Almeder is saying that anyone who examines the evidence and denies that reincarnation is the case is behaving unreasonably. Even I thought that this was a bit over the top when I first read it. And it must be very offensive to those in the (2)nd epistemological perspective, and perhaps even to those in the (3)rd perspective who do not believe that reincarnation is the case. But instead of ranting about “epistemological totalitarianism,” one could do what some of my bright undergraduates did in a seminar I taught recently. They took Almeder’s statement not as criticism but as a challenge. They went deeply into the cases, read books and articles by Tucker and Stevenson, and went over Almeder’s argumentation in detail. In the end, they could find no fault with Almeder’s argumentation. And when one cannot find anything wrong with an argument . . . the premises are true and the reasoning is sound . . . then it is not reasonable to reject the conclusion. My students saw this. And they also saw that when one has an argument that one cannot refute, but one is still not able or willing to accept the conclusion, this is the point where nonrational factors (such as ridicule, intimidation, name-calling, denial) enter the discussion.

Thus, to consider a few more examples and mention a few more names, the scientists van Lommel (*Consciousness beyond Life*), Tart (*The End of Materialism*), Kelly (*Irreducible Mind*), Radin (*The Conscious Universe*), and Tucker (*Life before Life*) announce the conclusions they have come to through

the titles of their books. Their conclusions are, respectively, that consciousness continues after the death of the body, that Materialism has been falsified by science, that the human mind is not reducible to the brain, that the Universe is conscious, and that consciousness exists prior to birth. These scientists did not arrive at their conclusions by attending “New Age Fairs” or overdosing on “*The Secret* type of New Age theories” (Cardeña, p. 548). No. Their conclusions were arrived at only after a meticulous and exhaustive examination of all the relevant empirical data, together with a detailed analysis and refutation of all alternative hypotheses. If Cardeña does not like their conclusions, then I invite him, and others who feel as he does, to accept the challenge, as my students did, to go deeply into the subject matter, and to examine their arguments, and tell us where they are mistaken in their reasoning. And if you cannot find any errors in their argumentation, as I could not, then is it not incumbent on you, as a scientist and rational human being, to embrace their conclusion that “consciousness can exist independent of the brain and that Materialism is therefore empirically false” (Grossman, cited disapprovingly in Cardeña, p. 541)?

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