

EDITORIAL

In these editorials I prefer not to revisit issues I've covered before, much less recycle previous editorials. But the recent Michigan conference of the SSE has convinced me that the time may have arrived. What provoked me was this. On several occasions I happened to overhear attendees making confidently dismissive remarks about what they took to be the extreme or outlandish views and presentations they'd encountered during the conference. And I was reasonably certain that many of those expressing these opinions did so with little or no justification for the certitude they displayed. With that in mind, I submit again, with a few suitable updates, some remarks I made back in Volume 23.

It's not often that I get to feel like a spokesperson for empirical conservatism. But that happened when I was invited to give a talk at the 50th Annual Conference on Anomalous Phenomena sponsored by the International Fortean Organization (INFO). The occasion provided several healthy illustrations about what I suppose we can call boggle relativity. The conference was stimulating, challenging, and professionally run, and I was happy to meet quite a few very smart and pleasant attendees.

But one thing that struck me especially was the difference I frequently noticed between the phenomena I was (more or less) comfortable incorporating into my worldview and the phenomena others there were equally prepared to accept. Often enough, that difference felt to me like a gaping chasm. For example, I was chatting with one clearly bright and well-read man about the evidence for remote viewing. Initially, we seemed to be very much on the same page. We apparently agreed on what the evidence was, we agreed that the phenomenon was genuine, and initially at least I thought we also agreed on the implications of the data and what they suggested about the place of human beings in nature. But then, in what struck me as a dazzling and swift series of unfounded assumptions and apparently unjustified inferential leaps, my interlocutor started asserting—with the same degree of assurance he'd lavished on the experimental evidence for remote viewing—that remote viewers were having out-of-body experiences in which they traveled to distant parts of the universe and communicated with rocks and other apparently inert objects. And he interpreted OBEs literally, insisting that OBE-ers were in fact leaving their bodies—rather than, say, having imagery-rich clairvoyant episodes while remaining thoroughly embodied.

Perhaps some *JSE* readers will be more sympathetic to these claims

than I was. Nevertheless, they were moves I was not ready to make. Still, I had to be careful not to fall instinctively into the sort of knee-jerk skepticism I frequently encounter and about which I've often complained in print. I had to remember that at one time I was equally ready to dismiss—no doubt with a disdainful flourish—any sympathetic claim regarding the evidence of parapsychology. I also had to recall that, even after coming to terms philosophically with the experimental evidence in parapsychology, I was still contemptuous of the non-experimental evidence—that is, until I studied that evidence carefully and eventually documented my conceptual evolution (Braude 1997). In fact, I couldn't help but remember that, much more recently, I had to re-evaluate my dismissive attitude toward astrology in the face of my wife's astonishing virtuosity (see Braude 2007:Chapter 8).

Don't get me wrong. I still have my dismissive attitude toward what I considered to be the extreme positions of my interlocutor. Whether I like it or not, that attitude is a fact about my current intellectual and emotional life, and I can't simply make it disappear with a cunning and quick bit of ratiocination. So for now at any rate, I'd be surprised (to say the least) if I later came to believe that we can communicate with alien (or terrestrial) sticks and stones. But I felt and continue to feel that it would have been inappropriate and unwarranted for me to have expressed my attitude and to have attached any great importance to it. I felt that if I'd done that, I'd have been every bit as contemptible as the glib and condescending skeptics whose attacks on parapsychology I've often tried to expose. After all, I couldn't pretend that my skepticism was rooted in a command of the relevant material. In fact, I hadn't even read the works to which my interlocutor was referring. So although I realized I wasn't a total ignoramus about the topics under discussion and was arguably entitled to at least some degree of skepticism, I knew also that I probably hadn't identified and thought through all the relevant issues. As far as I knew at that moment, my dismissive attitude was grounded mostly in my smugness about what I thought I knew. I also knew that if the history of science has taught us anything, it's shown that humankind is a very poor judge of the empirically possible. So the only thing I felt I could honestly and appropriately do at the time was to confess both my doubts and my ignorance, and not pretend that my judgments on the matter were delivered from a privileged post atop Mt. Olympus.

What continues to disturb me, though, is how easily I lapsed into a kind of superciliousness I've worked hard to combat in both myself and others. Maybe it's one of those demons in life that can never be fully vanquished and which will forever demand our vigilance. So it occurs to me that perhaps the time is right to remind *JSE* readers and others working in the area of anomalistics or frontier science that there's no lawlike correlation

between certitude and certainty, and, thus, that we need to remain both humble and collegial.

The *JSE* exists for the purpose of examining carefully empirical and theoretical claims about which many people, including regular readers of the *Journal*, have very strong opinions, both pro and con. The community of *JSE* subscribers is hardly uniform. It's a collection of individuals from different educational and scientific backgrounds, with different interests and assumptions, and of course with different boggle thresholds. I know that some readers of the *Journal* discount the interests of others, and I consider that state of affairs unfortunate. I'd like to think that *JSE* authors and readers have all been somewhat chastened about reacting quickly and negatively to empirical claims that strike them as beyond the pale. I would imagine that most of them have been stung at some time by others' negative and seemingly ignorant or hasty reactions to their own beliefs, and probably many have experienced changes in their own boggle thresholds similar to those I've mentioned from my own life.

I share the view of C. S. Peirce that of all earthly creatures we seem to have a distinctive knack for understanding the world around us. But that knack is merely what allows us to make scientific and intellectual progress and to frame increasingly successful theoretical frameworks. However, our faculty of understanding at no time provides a guarantee that we're making *steady and unimpeded* scientific progress and have managed to avoid getting off track—much less that we've arrived at a kind of timeless truth beyond mere warranted assertibility.

So when I now reflect back on the INFO conference, what stands out for me is how refreshingly tolerant and warm the participants were. I know that open-mindedness comes in degrees and that it shades gradually and eventually imperceptibly into credulity. But that's no different from the way cognitive caution or skepticism shades into intellectual rigidity and closed-mindedness. Despite the differences between my beliefs or theoretical orientation and those of some other conference attendees, in important ways I felt I was among kindred spirits. What I particularly admired about those I met was their respect for data, their recognition that data are always subject to varying interpretations, and their willingness to question not only received opinions but their own opinions as well.

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References

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