

# The Scientific Fallacy

## Ruminations on Psi Research and Reviews

by Miles Edward Allen

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*Evidence in science is always a matter of degree ... Both critics and proponents need to learn to think of adjudication in science as more like that found in the law courts, imperfect and with varying degrees of proof and evidence.*

— Marcello Truzzi

“On Pseudo-Skepticism,” the *Zetetic Scholar*, #12-13.

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Carl Sagan, whom I greatly admired as a concerned and public-spirited astronomer, once asked: “How is it, that channelers never give us verifiable information otherwise unavailable?”<sup>1</sup>

Other than the biased way in which Sagan’s question is phrased (*i.e.* the assumption that they *don’t* give such information), there are several difficulties here. The main one, as you should realize by now, is that channelers *have* provided information unknown to anyone living at the time, yet subsequently verified. Garland’s buried crosses, the Cayce oil-of-smoke incident, and the Millboro underground railroad are a few that come to mind immediately. But besides revealing his ignorance of psychic phenomena, Sagan’s comments demonstrate several common problems with the so-called “scientific” approach.

On first hearing it, the concept of “verifiable information otherwise unavailable” sounds reasonable enough, but a closer examination reveals an extremely tough, if not impossible, criterion. “Information otherwise unavailable” would have to be information proven not to exist in any person’s mind or in any library or any other place in the world! And since, as skeptics are so fond of pointing out, “it is impossible to prove a negative,” this proof is unattainable. No matter how hard one tried, one could never be sure that the information was not available somewhere.

As if this wasn’t obstacle enough, Sagan also wants the information to be “verifiable.” Just how, do you suppose, is it possible to verify information that doesn’t exist?

Let’s look at one of the examples he offers in elaborating his query. “Why does Alexander the Great never tell us about the exact location of his tomb?”

Suppose that a psychic did meet with professor Sagan and channeled Alexander, who revealed his

tomb’s location precisely enough for an archeological team to dig it up. Based on the history of the scientific community’s reaction to phenomena that do not fit in their world view, we can be sure that such a series of events would change the minds of very few scientists, and of no professional skeptics. Instead of “Wow, channeling is a real phenomenon!” we would have a chorus of lettered men and women claiming:

(1) that the location of the tomb must have been in some document seen by the channeler, or

(2) that the channeler actually ‘saw’ the tomb clairvoyantly, or

(3) that the channeler precognitively saw the future discovery of the tomb, or

(4) that the location of the tomb was pulled from the “collective unconscious,” or

(5) that Sagan and the channeler are frauds who made up the story after the tomb was discovered.

If you think this last option too outlandish, you don’t know how fast scientists can turn on a brother, no matter how well respected. Had he endorsed the channeler, the esteemed professor would have been ostracized faster than you can say “Crackpot Carl.”

And how might Sagan have reacted to the tomb’s discovery? A strong clue is in his next paragraph, in which he says: “If some good evidence for life after death were announced, I’d be eager to examine it; but it would have to be real scientific data, not mere anecdote.”

Whenever skeptics demand that psychic evidence be “scientific,” they mean that it must come from replicable experiments, perfectly designed and perfectly controlled. Of course, they are well aware that no experiment of any kind has ever been perfect and so they will always have a way of discrediting evidence that doesn’t fit their view of things. And even if

it were “good” evidence based on “real scientific data,” Sagan does not suggest that he would accept it, only that he would “examine it.”

Scientists also know that psychic phenomena in general and spirit communication in particular do not lend themselves well to repeatable laboratory experimentation. For example, the main reason that Alexander hasn’t revealed the location of his tomb is probably that he has better things to do than try to communicate with skeptical scientists.

Not only does Sagan require this scientific evidence, he goes further and rules out the acceptance of “mere anecdote.” Now, an “anecdote” is a brief account of an interesting incident; therefore, Sagan is setting up a dichotomy: either evidence is “real scientific data” or it must be treated as just another story or fable. Note that he leaves no room for testimony. No matter how many nor how prestigious the witnesses to the interesting incident, no matter what oath is taken under what penalty, all testimony is relegated to folklore unless the incident can be repeated in a laboratory or seen through a scope.

### **The Irrepressible Spirits**

The key difficulty in trying to apply the scientific method to the investigation of paranormal abilities and events is the impossibility of controlling all the parameters, especially the ethereal ones.

The work of Dr. Schwartz as detailed in *The Afterlife Experiments* provides excellent examples of this problem, I focus on Schwartz’ work because it is some of the best ever done, not because it is uniquely susceptible to the problems — which are endemic to all “scientific” research in the field.

Schwartz reports that after several of the readings by the psychics, lists of possible statements were shown to students acting as a control group, who attempted to guess what statements might apply to the sitter. In normal scientific research, control groups are gatherings of people who are not involved with or affected by the object of investigation. For instance, if the study concerns the effects of a certain pill, the control group would consist of folks who have never taken the pill. But in researching psychical abilities, the attributes being studied cannot be assumed to be limited to the test group. If any personality survives death, it is very likely (although not absolutely certain) that *every* personality survives death. If anyone can receive messages from discarnate beings, then it is highly probable that *everyone* can receive messages from discarnate beings, to some extent or another.

Such universal potentials make it impossible to isolate a control group from the phenomena being studied. All that Schwartz accomplished by creating control groups of this sort was to give skeptics another opportunity for irrelevant criticism.

The same problem applies to the idea (mentioned by Schwartz and endorsed by at least one reviewer) of comparing the psychic’s performance to that of a “cold-reader” (someone practiced in making educated guesses based on the sitter’s responses and body language). But, consider what might happen if the cold-reader’s great grand dad were to take that moment to make his presence known and give a little unsought help. In such a case, truly astounding “guesses” could be made that weren’t guesses at all. Such interference from the other side would totally distort the outcome of the test and no one would be the wiser.

### **The Keene Example**

An incident described in the confessions of Lamar Keene<sup>2</sup> provides an excellent example of the problem. No skeptic has ever doubted Keene’s claim that he achieved wealth and fame as a trance medium through the use of trickery and fraud. His life was turned completely around, Keene testifies, when he met a woman named Florence Hutchinson who became an inspirational mother figure to him. This woman had traveled from Oklahoma to obtain a reading from Keene at the spiritualist enclave of Camp Chesterfield in Indiana. But she had not made a reservation so, Keene says, his “first inclination was to tell her to get lost ... But she really was a kindly and appealing lady,” so he allowed her to take the place of her friend who did have an appointment for the next day.

Keene claims that there is a network of fraudulent mediums around the country who maintain and share files of information on their sitters, and that the files kept at Chesterfield were some of the most extensive anywhere. But, when he went to consult these files, he says, “I found myself stymied. Florence Hutchison had never been to Chesterfield before and there was nothing on her in the files. However, since she looked like such an agreeable sort,” Keene decided he could get away with doing a cold reading.

This he did, and things were going fine until Florence requested his help in finding a legal document that had been missing since her husband’s death. At first she asked if the document had been taken by a certain cousin of whom she was suspicious. It would have been easy for Keene to say yes and end the

inquiry right there, but instead, for reasons unknown to him, he said: “Oh no.” Whereupon Florence (speaking to whom she thinks is her departed husband) asks: “Well darling, where is it?”

“There was no way of ducking the question except by pretending to lose trance and to suddenly wake up,” Keene writes, but: “Then I said the first thing that came into my head, which was: ‘You have a metal file cabinet at home, the portable one, and it has a false top in it. There is a key to the false top in the bottom under some papers. The document is in that false top.’” Keene thought that this sounded rather lame, but at least it did get rid of the woman — not for long, however. Florence rushed home to Oklahoma and, as you have probably guessed by now, found the missing document just where Keene said it would be.

Now, Florence’s mention of her cousin was exactly the kind of clue Keene was searching for in his cold reading, so what prompted him to reject that solution? As for the rest, Keene concludes that it was all an “incredibly lucky” guess. Actually, though, it was a series of four statements that Keene had no way of knowing: (1) that Florence had a portable metal file at home, (2) that the file had a false top, (3) that the key to that top was beneath the papers, and (4) that the missing document was in the false top. Dismissing those four statements — plus the rejection of the cousin’s involvement — as an occurrence of stupendous luck is, indeed, not credible.

Remember, also, that this incident proved to be the key to Keene’s reformation from fraudulent medium to honest citizen. Thus, we are asked to believe that this once-in-a-lifetime series of lucky guesses *just happened* to occur when the person who could inspire Keene’s turnaround *just happened* to unexpectedly take a friend’s place in his séance room. I, for one, reject such a long line of coincidences as preposterous. It is far more reasonable to conclude that Keene had a real psychic experience when he most needed one, especially in light of all the other evidence in favor of spirit contact.

(Note that Keene was hardly the first to lead distraught widows to secret compartments holding important papers. As far back as the mid 1700s, the great scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg did the same.)<sup>3</sup>

If spirits can interfere with a cold reading by an admittedly phoney medium, they can certainly influence cold-readings done as adjuncts to scientific experiments just as they can assist the folks in experimental control groups in making “guesses.” **You**

**simply cannot remove the influence of the dead upon the living.**

### Counting Blanks

Dead folks are also notoriously unreliable. This creates another problem area for scientists researching the paranormal, as is evident in Schwartz’ account of a session<sup>4</sup> in which the medium simply drew a blank, receiving no information about the sitter. Logic and fairness would demand that this session be thrown out of the study. Clearly, it is unreasonable to expect there to be a willing spirit hanging around to talk about every sitter every time. But Schwartz counted the sitting as one in which the medium’s accuracy was scored at zero percent — just as if the medium had made a series of statements without any hits. Averaging this zero score in with the medium’s other scores would seriously lower the medium’s overall rating. I do not see a justification for this approach, unless Schwartz was assuming that the work of pulling information from “the great beyond” was being done solely by the medium and did not depend upon the cooperation of a dearly departed. (If such a bias existed, his results are doubly impressive.)

### Detectives Needed

Another trouble science has with psi arises from trying to quantify information that is essentially qualitative. Of what value are counts of hits and misses on irrelevant trivia such a pet’s initials or whether the diseased organ was a gall bladder or a spleen? Clearly, numbers *do* lie, or, at least, they are subject to biased interpretations. Statistics are designed to smooth over anomalous results; what we need is to *focus on* the anomalies. All the bar charts and derivatives in the world are not as convincing as a single revelation of unique character attested to by unimpeachable witnesses. To help dig up such evidence, I propose that scientists equip their teams not with statisticians, nor with cold-readers, nor magicians, but with good old-fashioned detectives.

As an example of what I mean, let’s examine a case related by Dr. Thelma Moss, in her book *The Probability of the Impossible*.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Moss tells of an investigation by her lab that was prompted by a homeowner’s complaint that four different guests, on four separate occasions, had reported seeing a man walking about the house — a man who wasn’t there. The homeowner, himself, had never seen this “ghost.”

According to Moss, she endeavored to be “scientific” about the investigation by having each of

the witnesses interviewed separately and the interviews tape recorded. From these, she learned that each witness reported seeing a man in dark pants and a white shirt (one witness included a suit jacket) walking in and around the house — one witness saw the apparition by a bedroom door, one by the swimming pool, and two saw it walking into the dining room. Next, Moss arranged for six psychics and six “non-psychics” to be given an individual tour of the house, after which they marked on maps any places where they sensed a ghost. Dr. Moss does not include the entire study in her book, but she does make note of “the sophisticated statistical analysis” made of the data. I can just imagine the skeptics tearing that sophisticated analysis to shreds — and, of course, never mentioning the astounding facts buried beneath.

A good detective, searching for proof “beyond reasonable doubt,” would pursue this case quite differently. The first step is to go to great lengths to discover if the witnesses were telling the truth when they claimed they did not know one another. This would include full background checks, interviews with friends and neighbors, and perhaps even some stake-outs. If any signs of collusion (or even communication) are discovered, then the evidence would be irrevocably contaminated and the investigation discontinued. At the same time, an investigation is needed as to whether or not any of the witnesses have a history of hallucinations or psychoses or have a reputation for playing practical jokes or telling tall tales.

The next item on our detective’s agenda is to investigate the possibility that the homeowners had shared one witness’ experience with any of the other witnesses, or had encouraged or prompted witnesses in any way (including supplying them with hallucinatory drugs). This would involve further interviews of the witnesses, and the homeowners, and any household help, and close neighbors. Also a full background check on the homeowners is in order to see if they have reported, or been involved in, this sort of incident in the past.

When all the interviews and background checks are done, if he has uncovered no evidence of false testimony, our detective has little choice but to declare the facts valid as reported. In other words, it can be concluded beyond a reasonable doubt that the witnesses actually saw the figure of a man in dark pants and white shirt walking about the house.

Next, our detective considers alternative possibilities for the sightings, the first being hallucination. From our “legal” point-of-view, one witness

alone is worthless. She might have actually seen a ghost, but she might be hallucinating due to mental illness, or drugs, or fatigue, or some unknown reason. The likelihood of two witnesses sharing the same hallucination at different times, however, is too incredible to consider. So hallucination can be ruled out in this case.

Unless of course, there really was a stranger present, and it was the homeowner who was having the negative hallucination that a real person was *not* visible. Negative hallucinations are rare, but can be induced via hypnosis, so our dogged gumshoe needs to explore the possibility that the homeowner is under the influence of a hypnotist. Come to think of it, the same goes for the witnesses, who might have all attended a lounge show by the same stage hypnotist who instructed them to see a ghost the next time they were visiting the homeowner. All of which is extremely unlikely, but easy enough to check.

Another improbable but possible scenario is that some prankster or villain used holographic projection or some other technology to display a realistic, 3-dimensional movie of a man in dark pants and white shirt. Our detective can rule this out, not only because the homeowner did not see the apparition as it “walked swiftly around the pool,” but because the incidents took place in three different locations, thereby vastly increasing the difficulty of unobtrusively setting up and dismantling the required equipment.

Assuming that all the interrogations and investigations had been properly done with no adverse results, the “case of the four visitors” could have been one of the most evidential ever reported. Nothing is ever absolutely, 100-percent certain, but it would have been evidential enough to deserve the label “solid proof” that ghosts exist.

### **The Role of Science**

As for the continuation of life after death, it seems clear that experts will never reach a consensus on a statistically sound, scientifically replicable, proof. Not only can statistics always be distorted, but some experimental factors, such as the involvement of discarnate entities, can never be controlled. In my opinion, this does not matter, for cases such as those presented in *The Survival Files*<sup>6</sup> and on the *Survival Top 40* website are more than sufficient to establish proof beyond a reasonable doubt in any court of logical and objective minds.

All this should not be construed to mean that

I am some sort of psychic Luddite seeking a return to the days of table tipping in darkened parlors — not without an infrared camera anyway. EMF meters, voice analyzers, EEG machines, and other such technological advances have a definite place in psi research. And science has a valid role in determining the characteristics and factors at play in various phenomena. But, scientists need to stop wasting time and resources on attempts to prove the already proven existence of psychic phenomena and concentrate more on determining how it works. ■

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Endnotes

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