

# Prospect

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#### My short love affair with magic

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When I was 12, I read the mind of a friend. We were experimenting with telepathy. My friend was staring at a card, firing questions at me. Black or red? Black. Spades or clubs? Clubs. Picture card or number card? Number card. Higher or lower than five? Lower. Then, quite distinctly, on the inside of my eyelids, a bright green number four hovered. Four. Correct on all counts-the four of clubs.

I read avidly, as children do, about ghosts, UFOs, out-of-the-body-experiences, clairvoyance, telekinesis and the rest. I knew the stories of Marie Celeste, the abominable snowmen, the Bermuda triangle. I often had difficulty sleeping.

Two things demolished my belief in the paranormal. The first was magic. A few years after my telepathy games, I became a semi-competent, semi-professional magician. (I was to magic what Paul Daniels is to comedy.) It wasn't just that magic taught me the techniques of deception-though their sheer deviousness and simplicity are in themselves humbling. More importantly, it taught me something about the psychology of belief. I am not going to be lynched by the heavy mob of the magic world for revealing that what you may have heard before is true: the essence of magic is misdirection -not just the art of making people look in the wrong direction, but making them think in the wrong way, using the quirks of their perceptions and assumptions against them.

The second agent of my conversion was a book, *Forbidden Knowledge*, by Bob Couttie, now out of print. The book is a systematic debunking of all kinds of paranormal phenomena from Uri Geller's spoon-bending (he just bends them when you're not looking, really) to mediums (a confluence of grieving wish-fulfilment, psychological acuity and trickery).

More significant, perhaps, was my first serious encounter with the power of scientific method. Lucidly, Couttie explains the principles of repeatability of experiments, the communal verification of scientific results, controlled conditions, reduced variables and control subjects, falsifiability of hypotheses and so on.

Previously, all explanations for the paranormal had seemed small-minded attempts to preserve an all too tedious status quo, but I now felt empowered to doubt even those cases for which I did not have a scientific explanation to hand. I had become one of those stuck-in-the-mud sceptics I had previously scorned. The burden of proof had shifted on to the believers and they weren't producing the goods.

More recently, I have changed my mind again. I haven't returned to my belief in the paranormal. But I have become more suspicious of the alternative. The problem with converts is that the will to believe all too often transcends the change of its object. Attacks on the paranormal, religion and other forms of "unscientific" belief go hand in hand with an uncritical faith in science itself.

Proselytisers for science bemoan public ignorance, the rise of "New Ageism" and the lack of respect shown to scientists. This ignorance and superstition may well be a problem, but the claim that science does not get enough respect is an anachronism. With the declining public significance of religious belief since the 19th century and of political, philosophical or artistic truth since the 1960s, science is the dominant system of truth in the late 20th century west. Part of the reason for this is the productivity of scientific objectivity. But one of its effects is a disregard for the limits of scientific explanation or, indeed, the particular nature of scientific method.

Take one example. Richard Dawkins opens *The Selfish Gene* with an extraordinarily bold claim. Since Darwin, "We no longer have to resort to superstition when faced with the deep problems. Is there meaning to life? What are we for? What is man?" All pre-Darwinian answers to these questions are "now worthless except for their (considerable) historical interest."

Evolutionary science, to be sure, has useful answers to these questions. Dawkins's mistake is to think that these answers make other levels of questioning worthless. There is more to thinking about what human beings are and what they are for than a good hypothesis for the dynamics of their material existence. We may, at one level, be survival machines for selfish genes (even here, as Dawkins knows, we have to think carefully about the role of culture), but this hardly offers us a complete answer to questions of ethical conduct or a definitive vision of what life means. Perhaps Dawkins's most revealing solecism is his assertion that all non-Darwinian attempts to address the "deep problems" are based on superstition, as if he believes, like the simple-minded sceptic, that there is only good science and bad superstition, and nothing in between. There ought to be a space for a critical scepticism which can acknowledge the force of science while recognising its biases. There are different kinds of truth and we need all of them. We need to put science, valued as it is, in its place. n

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