

## Foreword

Some years ago, ABC television invited me to join two neuroscientist friends at an exclusive two-day closed conference—a “retreat” for their top executives in a hotel in Palm Springs—on the topic of minds and brains. When we got to Palm Springs, we found ourselves cast as the heavies, the defenders of the scientific establishment against a curious array of faith healers, ESP proponents and other friends of the supernatural. We were polite, we were open-minded, but we minced no words. We efficiently dismantled their presentations, ruthlessly exposing the sloppy reasoning, the wishful thinking, the unacceptably low standards of evidence presented on behalf of these forlorn topics. I felt quite pleased with our performance, but one of my friends knew better. At the closing banquet, he leaned over and said to me: “Watch this.” He stood and announced to the assembled audience that he would like to address to them two questions: “Before this weekend, how many of you thought there was probably something to the paranormal, in spite of all the scientific disparagement?” To my surprise, perhaps a quarter of the hands went up—these were highly educated executives in the competitive world of network television, and their presumably equally well-formed spouses and companions. His second question: “And now, after this weekend, how many of you think there is something to it?” *More* hands went up. I was thunderstruck. What could explain this bizarre outcome? How could our nicely crafted demolitions have turned out to be so counterproductive?

According to the old saying, a poor workman blames his tools. One might add that a poor professor blames his students. Whose fault is it, then, that a surprising number of people still believe in ESP, ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena? Are

## Foreword

these people just stupid? Surely not. Or are the professors incompetent? I doubt it. Do credulous sensation-seekers gravitate to positions of power in the mass media? I doubt that too, or in any case, I doubt that they could have much influence on the rest of the population, unless there was some powerful prevailing sentiment on which to feed. What is it? Why do these beliefs persist so vigorously, so defiantly, in spite of the triumphs of modern science?

The explanation I received in Palm Desert from one of the attendees was fascinating, but did not satisfy me: "I just figured, what with all you professional researchers working so hard to show us why it was crazy, why, there just had to be more there than met the eye!" Indeed, there must be more there than met the eye, but until now, nobody in the scientific world has asked the right questions about this strange phenomenon. We regularly respond with alarm to the statistics, and deplore the ignorance, and chide the benighted for their gullibility, but we seldom if ever ask ourselves the questions Nicholas Humphrey asks—and answers—here. If there is a prevailing wind blowing in favor of the supernatural, what is its source? Why does it exist at all, and why are rational demonstrations so impotent against it?

Not a single purported supernatural or paranormal phenomenon has escaped the corrosive attention of scrupulous skeptics, and not a single such phenomenon has escaped one form of demotion or another. There is a tell-tale pattern in the results: the more dramatic the claims, the more conclusive the demonstration of fraud. Only a few arguably significant but scarcely detectable statistical anomalies remain so far unaccounted for. As objective scrutiny approaches, these phenomena always evaporate, leaving at most the faintest trace of a possibility of a real effect. There is another tell-tale pattern exposed by Humphrey, in what he calls the Argument from Unwarranted Design. What law of spooky gravity attracts paranormal phenomena to such hokey circumstances? Why would people with genuine powers of psychokinesis bother selling tickets to make money, when they could presumably just levitate the money out of people's wallets or bank vaults? Or, if they are too honest and civic-minded to stoop to such practices, why don't they use their powers to remove inop-

## Foreword

erable tumors or transfix evil dictators? Shouldn't spoon-bending be beneath the dignity of such marvelously empowered people?

Our culture, Humphrey says, has played a remarkable confidence trick on us: "This has been to persuade people that there is a deep connection between believing in the possibility of psychic ces and being a gracious, honest, upright, trustworthy member of society." [p186] We skeptics sometimes sense a need to apologize for our mean-spirited skepticism! It is not polite to expose the gullibility of decent, intelligent, well-meaning folks, *spiritual* folks, who have savored the depths of meaning to be found in these experiences. This ambient attitude is perhaps not hard to explain. Anybody who can appreciate the wisdom of not spoiling the thrill of Santa Claus for a small child can readily extend the principle, but aren't we adults supposed to grow up some day? Humphrey shines his piercing but humane spotlight on all these issues, and comes up with a surprising bounty of new insights. Whatever your current beliefs, you will be wiser for reading this book.

Daniel Dennett  
January 1999