

Cartoon Metaphysics

The Dilbert Future, by Scott Adams,  
HarperBusiness, 1997, 258 pages, \$25, hardcover, ISBN 0-88730-886-X.

Reviewed by David Bloomberg

You're probably wondering what the review of a Dilbert book is doing in The REALL News. That's okay, I was wondering what nonsense portrayed as serious commentary on science was doing in a Dilbert book!

Don't get me wrong, The Dilbert Future is a funny, enjoyable book -- until the final chapter. It is at that point that author Scott Adams drops the humor and replaces it with his serious musings on the world. These musings, however, look like they could have come from any random New Age "induhvidual" (his term for the billions of idiots who get in the way of the smart people who read Dilbert books).

Most of Adams' musings here begin with the logical fallacy that if he can't understand something, then it is not understandable by anybody and therefore probably isn't true. Or worse, he finds a subject he doesn't understand and then proceeds to make huge leaps of illogic to create new forces in the universe!

He tries to leave himself a loophole by stating at the beginning of this foray into nonsense that "some -- if not all -- of what I tell you next is scientifically inaccurate and maybe even illogical." But he goes on to say that it doesn't matter since he is just trying to get people to "imagine how your reality could be completely different from what you perceive and still look exactly the way it looks." In other words, he disclaims all errors from the outset and then wanders off into an oblivion of speculation.

I won't go into every detail here; indeed, he makes all sorts of claims about cause and effect, quantum physics (or, as his speculations are more appropriately called, "quantum quackery"), affirmations (the ability to change reality with one's mind merely by repeatedly thinking about some goal), etc., but I will only hit the lowest point in his illogic: his use of an anecdotal account that "proved" psychic powers to him. He calls himself a "natural skeptic," but then claims there are "experiments where some people seem to consistently beat the laws of averages in ESP tests." How is it that a cartoonist knows about these supposed tests, but I haven't met a good scientist who does?

To convince of us his "skepticism," he says that the media cannot convince him of this -- he would have to experience it firsthand. This is a classic mistake, and I could tell upon reading it that he was just setting himself up. I'm sorry, Mr. Adams, but you are not qualified to determine if somebody is using ESP "firsthand." But that's exactly what he did. He says he met a woman who claimed to have psychic powers. He'd heard reports that psychics are more accurate under hypnosis and was taking a class to learn it, so he asked if he could hypnotize and test the woman. (I'd love to know where this concept of psychics being "more accurate" under hypnosis came from -- considering we have yet to see good evidence that they can be accurate at all, but I digress.)

Follow along with this and see if you can spot the problems. First, she brought her own deck of tarot cards. Second, he was alone with her (in his house); he claims he "could totally control" the setting. He sat across the room from her and hypnotized her easily (he goes on to say there is "anecdotal evidence that psychics are easily hypnotized"). He shuffled the cards and picked one. She described the wrong card. He picked another and she described it wrong as well, but she described perfectly the first card he had picked. He picked a total of five cards and she described all five, but she was always one behind. When he asked her why she had gotten them out of order, she gave him some story about not being able to distinguish between the near past and the near future. Huh?

Okay, did you figure out the problems here? First, she brought the cards. That means they could have been marked and he would never have known. Second, they were all alone. While he thought he was controlling the setting, in fact that

gave her the perfect opportunity to use any possible trickery without worrying that somebody else might notice. Third, just because she appeared to be easily hypnotized doesn't mean a thing. Fourth, the effect she created is a classic mentalist "one-ahead" trick. He was probably very careful to hide the card he was looking at (and indeed says he held it up against his chest), but once she had guessed for that card, it was unlikely he was so careful about it; this is especially true if her cards were marked on the back. Fifth, we are relying totally on his memory of these events; people in these situations have notoriously bad recollection of specifics. (James Randi has talked about a journalist who claims a famous key-bender never touched the key; when he showed her videotape proving that he had, indeed, held the key, she still insisted that's not the way she remembered it.) These are just the obvious problems that struck me immediately; magicians could probably point to several more.

But to further "prove" her abilities, the psychic found a "break" in his aura -- right under his armpit, where he had a "bad rash" that he was having trouble treating. Even though he calls it a "bad rash," he then goes on to say, "it wasn't bad enough to cause itching or anything that would have tipped her off." Again, I have to wonder about Adams' recollection of the event. Just because he doesn't think he did anything to tip her off doesn't mean he actually didn't. I've seen a number of dead-on accurate cold readings done by people who are in no way, shape, or form psychics (for example, REALL's old friend, Investigator Bruce Walstad), and in every case the people who were being read were certain that they have not given anything away.

Finally, she hit the big one. She asked him if he was afraid of water. He says that water is his only irrational fear and was amazed at her powers. Then he remembered being afraid of water while on a bridge as a child. The psychic said, "I see a bridge." It is too bad that you didn't do more research on this, Mr. Adams, but you were just given a cold reading. I have to wonder how many other questions she asked; are we just dealing with a simple case of only remembering the positives? Water and bridges are fairly standard; I'm sorry, but I'm just not impressed.

Adams ends this tale by saying that since he is part of the media, he doesn't expect anybody to believe his story, "although it's true." To the contrary, I believe that this is exactly how he remembers it. However, I also have seen enough cases like this to suspect that Mr. Adams was simply fooled. Strangely, Adams began this chapter by talking about how perceptions can lead you astray (for example, the perception of earlier civilizations that the sun revolved around the earth). He notes, "Our eyesight was inadequate for the task. It took some experimentation and a lot more looking to find the truth." Fine. Good.

But then why does he ignore that very sentence while discussing his wonderful psychic? Mr. Adams needs to take his own advice. He also needs to stick to what he does best: Making people laugh. Cartoons don't require much research; science does. Stick to what you know, Mr. Adams.

David Bloomberg is the Chairman of REALL. He really enjoys Dilbert comic strips and wishes he'd never read the final chapter of this book. He firmly believes that we should never find out the personal opinions or beliefs of famous people whose work we admire.

## CSICOP Partnership With Local Groups Proposed

by David Bloomberg

Over Columbus Day weekend, the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) invited representatives from all of the local skeptics groups east of the Mississippi River to their headquarters at the Center for Inquiry in Buffalo, New York. I went as the REALL's representative.

It was an interesting and informative weekend, both for us (the local groups) and, I think, for CSICOP, who had not had such a meeting with so many representatives before. The two most important points to come out of the meeting are summarized below. If you have any comments or questions, please contact me.

### Centers for Inquiry

At the meeting, we were told that there is a plan to build Centers for Inquiry (CFIs) around the country in as many major metropolitan areas as possible (though I'm afraid nothing in Central Illinois really qualifies right now). CFI is joint home

of both CSICOP and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), and they discussed the possibility of bringing other groups in as well (such as groups related to health fraud issues).

These CFIs would act as bases from which the local groups can cooperate with them and make use of some of their resources to help in a variety of ways, depending upon the specific situation of that locality. For example, the Atlanta group has been dormant for the past couple of years because they relied on a single person to do all the work. That person, however, eventually could not handle the workload all by herself and the group has drifted apart. CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz pointed out that a CFI in Atlanta could have possibly provided a part-time secretary to take some of the workload.

In other cases, a CFI could provide office space (rather than having to work out of our homes), meeting places (not everybody gets free meeting rooms at the local library), and even a phone hotline. All of this depends, of course, on getting money to support them, but they are working on that as well (they would also expect help in that endeavor from the groups local to the CFI).

So, what does this mean for REALL? Right now, not much. As I said, it's not likely that a CFI will appear in Central Illinois any time soon. If one did appear in Chicago or St. Louis, then we could cooperate with them (indeed, the CFI in Kansas City has mentioned the possibility of working with us on some things; Editor Bob will be talking to them about that this month when he goes to a conference there). Also, the CFIs could be used as bases from which speakers can be farmed out (for example, if a well-known skeptical speaker came to the Chicago CFI, they might send him down to Springfield as well).

Affiliation

One proposal that came out of the meeting that certainly could affect us is the possibility of local groups affiliating with CSICOP.

Under this idea, which has not yet been approved by the CSICOP board (Paul Kurtz wanted to see what we thought of the idea first), local groups that chose to do so would become CSICOP affiliates and would therefore fall under CSICOP's status as a tax-exempt and tax-deductible organization. As I understand it, this would mean we would no longer have to pay sales tax and all donations to REALL would be tax-exempt. While local groups can accomplish this on their own, it can be expensive and time-consuming (one local group had several active members working on getting this done, they have already spent a good deal of time and money, and still have not gotten everything finalized).

Under this plan, we would remain autonomous and retain control over all of our operations; the only change would be that we'd have to submit a form to them every year detailing our financial status (contributions, expenditures, etc.). All of the local groups in attendance were very positive about the idea (remembering that we want the line between CSICOP and CSH to be kept).

So why wasn't this done sooner? Because when lawsuits started flying a number of years ago, several of them named CSICOP even though CSICOP had nothing to do with anything (in particular, there was a suit involving Hawaii's local group and naming CSICOP as a co-defendant, even though they had never even heard about the situation). Thus, while CSICOP helped to set up most (if not all) of the local groups, by loaning out mailing lists and aiding in other ways, the groups are independent and autonomous.

Now that the lawsuits seem to have died down and there is less of a worry that a single lawsuit will bankrupt the whole organization, CSICOP wants to reach out to the local groups.

In all honesty, I don't see a downside to this for REALL. If anybody has any concerns, please contact us, in case I'm missing anything (I'm an engineer, not a lawyer or an accountant).

Miscellaneous

One subject that spurred some debate was the fact that skeptics groups, in general, do not address religious issues, or, indeed, anything that is "non-testable." We only worry about those claims that can be tested. Thus, a claim that God exists (or doesn't exist) is non-testable and not addressed by our groups; a claim that a faith healer can rid you of cancer

is testable and would be addressed. CSH, as the name implies, addresses issues related to religion. The skeptics groups were worried that the association of these two groups in the same building might blur that line in the sand. In several sessions, we made our feelings known and I think we got our point across. We will continue to remind CSICOP of the way we feel. Perhaps the most interesting part of the meeting was the way every organized local skeptics group at the meeting stood together on this issue, even though most of us had never discussed it before. We did agree that we understand the need for CSICOP and CSH to share quarters within the CFIs due to economic concerns.

Overall, the meeting was time well-spent. In addition to these main points, there were other discussions, and there will soon be an Internet mailing list set up for representatives from local skeptics groups to share ideas, concerns, etc. This kind of cooperation can only help every local group and the cause of rational and critical thinking everywhere.

### Quackery: How Should It Be Defined?

by Stephen Barrett, M.D.

"Quackery" derives from the word quacksalver (someone who boasts about his salves). Dictionaries define quack as "a pretender to medical skill; a charlatan" and "one who talks pretentiously without sound knowledge of the subject discussed." These definitions suggest that the promotion of quackery involves deliberate deception, but many promoters sincerely believe in what they are doing. The FDA defines health fraud as "the promotion, for profit, of a medical remedy known to be false or unproven." This also can cause confusion because in ordinary usage -- and in the courts -- the word "fraud" connotes deliberate deception. Quackery's paramount characteristic is promotion ("Quacks quack!") rather than fraud, greed, or misinformation.

Most people think of quackery as promoted by charlatans who deliberately exploit their victims. Actually, most promoters are unwitting victims who share misinformation and personal experiences with others. Customers of multilevel companies that sell health-related products typically have been persuaded by friends, relatives, and neighbors who use the products because they believe them effective. Pharmacists also profit from the sale of nutrition supplements that few customers need. In most cases pharmacists do not champion the products but simply profit from the misleading promotions of others. Much quackery is involved in telling people something is bad for them (such as food additives) and selling a substitute (such as "organic" or "natural" food). Quackery is also involved in misleading advertising of dietary supplements, homeopathic products, and some nonprescription drugs. In many such instances no individual "quack" is involved -- just deception by manufacturers and their advertising agencies.

Quackery is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. A practitioner may be scientific in many respects and only minimally involved in unscientific practices. Also, products can be useful for some purposes but worthless for others. For example, vitamin B12 shots are lifesaving in cases of pernicious anemia, but giving them frequently to "pep you up" is a form of medical fraud.

Quackery and malpractice overlap but are not identical. Quackery entails the use of methods that are not scientifically accepted. Malpractice involves failure by a health professional to meet accepted standards of diagnosis and treatment. It includes situations in which the practitioner was negligent while using standard methods of care. Leaving a surgical instrument in a patient's abdomen or operating on the wrong part of the body are examples of malpractice unrelated to quackery.

To avoid semantic problems, quackery could be broadly defined as "anything involving overpromotion in the field of health." This definition would include questionable ideas as well as questionable products and services, regardless of the sincerity of their promoters. In line with this definition, the word "fraud" would be reserved only for situations in which deliberate deception is involved.

Unproven methods are not necessarily quackery. Those consistent with established scientific concepts may be considered experimental. Legitimate researchers and practitioners do not promote unproven procedures in the marketplace but engage in responsible, properly-designed studies. Methods not compatible with established scientific concepts should be classified as nonsensical or disproven rather than experimental.

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Stephen Barrett, M.D., a retired psychiatrist in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is a nationally renowned author, editor, and consumer advocate. His 43 books include *The Health Robbers: A Close Look at Quackery in America*. Dr. Barrett is a board member of the National Council Against Health Fraud, a Scientific Advisor to the American Council on Science and Health, and a Fellow of CSICOP. You can find the Quackwatch homepage at [www.quackwatch.com](http://www.quackwatch.com) and you may contact him by e-mail at [sbinfo@quackwatch.com](mailto:sbinfo@quackwatch.com).

From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

As we go to the press, the stock market fluctuated wildly. I wonder how the psychics did with their predictions -- or their investments.

In this issue, Chairman David reports on a special meeting held this month by CSICOP exploring the future of local group partnerships.

I also just got back from traveling to Kansas City for a Midwest Regional Conference hosted by the new Center for Inquiry - Midwest regional office. The three-day conference featured numerous speakers on a variety of topics dealing with the "culture wars," and I will be reporting on the first two days (my wife, Jean, and I fled the approaching snow storm on the third day) in a future issue.

The feature article deals with a cartoon character, namely Dilbert. We have featured other cartoon characters in past issues, such as Scooby Doo and the schmoo, and their connections with skeptic issues. Hope you enjoy it, and let me know what you think of Chairman David's article.

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The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

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