Do as I Say, Not as I Do

A Review of

*How to Think About Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age*

(7th ed.)

by Theodore Schick Jr. and Lewis Vaughn


(paperback). $80.00, paperback

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035701

Reviewed by

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*How to Think About Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age* is one of a number of books in recent years geared to courses on critical thinking, apparently a profitable market, seeing as this book is in its seventh edition. That much discourse in our society is indicative of an appalling lack of informed critical thinking can be easily seen in even a cursory inspection of our media. There are useful sections in this book that explain traditional logic, fallacious modes of argumentation, the limitations of various forms of purported evidence, the cognitive biases underlying many everyday heuristics (see also Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and so on.

Ideally, a book such as this would help the reader become an independent consumer who can carefully evaluate claims for mainstream and nonmainstream beliefs, but it becomes clear very quickly that this is not the authors’ intention. Already on page 4 Theodore Schick Jr. and Lewis Vaughn let readers know what they should think by stating that a number of claims are false, including "there is no such thing as objective truth," “there is no such thing as objective reality,” and "if an experience seems real, it is real.” With regard to the first two, there is a long series of foundational philosophers, including such varied thinkers as Kant, Locke, and James, who asserted that knowledge is filtered through epistemic categories, and that there is not a single comprehensive way to apprehend reality (James, 1876/1978; Robinson, 1995).

Thus, the issue about “objectivity” is far more complicated than Schick (a professor of philosophy) and Vaughn make it out to be. With respect to the “reality” of an experience, one would first have to make a distinction between the having of a experience, which is undoubtedly “real” qua experience, and the referent and causal antecedents of such experience, whether “weird” or not (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2014; Robinson, 1995), a distinction that the authors do not make.

Furthermore, the authors state on page x that their “emphasis, then, is neither on debunking nor on advocating specific claims.” But on page after page, they aim to show how
dumb and unfounded are beliefs in, for instance, parapsychology, aliens, morphic resonance, apparitions, conspiracy theories, and all the various topics that organized so-called skepticism decries (see any issue of magazines such as Skeptical Inquirer), while not submitting their own beliefs to the same scrutiny. It is telling that two of the three endorsements on the back cover are from members of skeptical organizations, one of them Fred Thornett, who, sparing no bile, concludes that this is “The best book in the world to help the layperson understand the trickery and stupidity [of] quacks, con men, ideologues, pseudoscientists."

At the same time, Schick and Vaughn endorse such cherished skeptical concepts as the "False Memory Syndrome" (p. 113), a condition that has yet to be recognized by diagnostic taxonomies of either the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or the International Classification of Diseases and that has been described by some researchers as "a non-psychological term originated by a private foundation whose stated purpose is to support accused parents" and whose validity and apparent impact are very questionable (Pope, 1996, p. 959). Similarly, the extraordinary conclusion that “bogus remedies and ‘quackery”’ kill more people than die from all crimes of violence put together (p. 12) is cited without question. Is their source an analysis of records or a meta-analysis of the evidence? No, it is the opinion of an attorney mentioned in another book.

Even regarding statements with which I agree, such as “But the opinion of experts is superior to our own only in their fields of expertise” (p. 72), the authors only offer examples to attack the ideas they despise but none to question their own views. For instance, the lack of research expertise of a lie detector specialist, Cleve Backster (whom the authors call "Clive"), who claimed that he could detect empathy in plants, is severely criticized. But, then, a few pages later (p. 88), the authors cite approvingly a letter against astrology by various scientists without mentioning Carl Sagan’s (1976) critique of this letter, which he wrote not to defend astrology but to point out that the cosignatories of the letter as a group had failed to do their homework and evaluate any evidence or conduct research related to their assertions. Schick and Vaughn list a number of fallacious arguments, such as ad hominem attacks or appeals to fear (pp. 51, 53), using made-up examples to ridicule the beliefs they want to attack while failing to cite the very real examples of these fallacies uttered by those attacking research on parapsychology (see Cardeña, 2011).

An extended example of the authors’ evident biases and failure to follow their own recommendations is found in their discussion of parapsychology. After having attacked it in previous sections, they discuss it under a section called Science and Its Pretenders, a title that anticipates their conclusion. When they get into the topic, their discussion is embarrassingly biased. For instance, they mention the possibility that some of the early ESP experimental results might have been accounted for by sensory leaks (which may, indeed, have been the case), but they make no mention of later experiments that controlled for those leaks and still obtained significant results (Storm, Tressoldi, & Di Risio, 2012). They talk about a recent meta-analysis (published in 1999!) of Ganzfeld research that is in line with their views but fail to mention more recent and comprehensive meta-analyses that counter their cited meta-analysis (Storm, Tressoldi, & Di Risio, 2010; Williams, 2011). Of course, they underline the infamous Randi challenge (a $1 million prize offer by the James Randi Educational Foundation to anyone who shows evidence of a paranormal event) without commenting that it is not at all a scientific procedure (as even some critics of parapsychology assert), that Randi has changed the rules of engagement when it has suited
him, and that he has admitted lying to further his debunking program (Storr, 2013; see also http://www.dailygrail.com/features/the-myth-of-james-randis-million-dollar-challenge).

Schick and Vaughn also make many factual mistakes throughout their book, showing lack of knowledge of the various areas they discuss. Among them are the following: “Normally, memory performs its functions without error” (p. 76; not true, see Schacter, 1999); “there is no evidence that backward or subliminal messages can have any effect on people’s behavior” (p. 103; not true, see Bar & Biederman, 1998); and night terrors are “waking dreams” (p. 272; not true, they occur during NREM stages and are not associated with dreaming, Hartmann, 1991). They also misspell names such as Ricket for Richet (p. 271) or Arguellas for Argüelles.

Perhaps their most embarrassing mistake is that they criticize in a whole section (pp. 301–306) the social construction of reality theory by misrepresenting it as “if enough people believe that something is true, it literally [emphasis added] becomes true for everyone” (p. 301). In fact, this influential theory in the sociology of knowledge holds that people’s conception of reality becomes embedded in the institutional fabric of society and that it is not a metaphysical theory as to the ultimate nature of reality but an analysis of how different groups come to their notions of what is real (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Besides the problems adumbrated, this book suffers from epistemic egocentricity and lack of imagination manifested in the authors’ inability to even consider that what they consider “unbelievable” (p. ix) is deemed to be believable by very rational people in other cultures (Shweder, 1986) and our own (Cardeña, 2013). Similarly, the authors’ explanations, for instance, of the use of verbal and nonverbal information (cold reading) for correct information coming from a medium were well known and controlled for more than 100 years ago by parapsychology researchers through proxy sittings in which the medium had access only to a person who could not provide any relevant information (Gauld, 1982; see Kelly & Arcangel, 2011, for more recent research along these lines).

Although the authors of How to Think About Weird Things at times aptly criticize what Flournoy (1911/2007, pp. 366–367) called the “silly superstition” of some beliefs, they follow dogmatically what he referred to as the “philosophy of the ostrich” of debunkers who fail to consider evidence and argumentation that are inconsistent with their beliefs (cf. Ditto & Lopez, 1992). Schick and Vaughn offer an unscientific double-standard discussion instead of engaging in the difficult task of trying to think and argue about complex evidence that sometimes resists easy explanations (for a similarly biased and uninformed “how to think” book, see Stanovich, 2013). Students and instructors wanting to develop critical thinking deserve better than this.

References

Cardeña, E. (2013). Eminent modern authors from other areas who researched and/or were supportive of parapsychology. *Mindfield*, 5, 83–90.


