

SPIRITUAL SNAKE OIL

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SEE SHARP PRESS  TUCSON, ARIZONA

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P.O. Box 1731
Tucson, AZ 85702

www.seesharppress.com

Edwards, Chris, 1977-

Spiritual snake oil : fads & fallacies in pop culture / Chris Edwards ;
introduction by Marie Alena Castle – Tucson, Ariz. : SeeSharp Press, 2011.

192 p. ; 23 cm.

Includes index and bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-884365-78-7 / 978-1-884365-78-2

Contents: Preface -- Why Debunk? -- Robert Pirsig and Philosophical Attacks
on Science (Motorcycle Maintenance without the Zen) -- Michael Crichton and
Intellectual Defense of the New Age -- The Celestine Fallacy -- The Secret (is out
of its mind) -- Deepak Chopra's Afterlife -- Francis Collins and "Intellectual"
Christianity -- Dinesh D'Souza and the New Revelation -- Ray Kurzweil : The
"Singularity" Isn't Even Close -- Simon Young and "Transhumanism" -- A
Compendium of Fallacies.

1. Success -- Psychological aspects. 2. Self-actualization (Psychology) 3. Spiritual
life in literature. 4. Christianity -- Essence, genius, nature.

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i> , by Marie Alena Castle	1
<i>Preface</i>	7
1. Why Debunk?	9
2. Robert Pirsig and Philosophical Attacks on Science	11
3. Michael Crichton and Intellectual Defense of the New Age	19
4. The Celestine Fallacy	27
5. The Secret Is Out (of its mind)	47
6. Deepak Chopra’s Afterlife.	57
7. Francis Collins and “Intellectual” Christianity	71
8. Dinesh D’Souza’s New Revelation	85
9. Ray Kurzweil—The “Singularity” Isn’t Even Close	93
10. Simon Young and “Transhumanism”	99
11. A Compendium of Fallacies	105
<i>Appendix: Model-Dependent Realism</i>	133
<i>Bibliography</i>	143
<i>Index</i>	145

CHAPTER 1

WHY DEBUNK?

Skepticism is a provisional approach to claims. Skepticism is a method, not a position.

—Michael Shermer, Editor of *Skeptic Magazine* and Author of *Why People Believe Weird Things*

Too many people see non-material philosophy as harmless. No doubt billions of worshippers are comforted by religious or spiritual ideas. Why not leave them alone?

First, in order to increase human happiness we need to make the world a better place. To put this another way, we need to create conditions that will lessen human suffering. There is nothing to be gained by abandoning the logic and rationality that have solved so many of humanity's problems. What if Thomas Edison and Louis Pasteur had spent their time chanting "Om" rather than perspiring in their labs?

Second, non-materialistic thinking clouds the mind and prevents us from seeing real solutions. Entire societies sometimes get infected by the religious virus. Instead of inquiring, thinking, and experimenting, such societies become static and run the same religious program, through ritual and indoctrination, over and over again like broken machines. The spiritual outlook on the world has *never* been helpful and has instead been a hindrance to understanding the world around us. The atheist/materialist/scientific outlook has *always* been helpful. So why, then, should we use a spiritual model to study something like consciousness

or near death experiences when it has so consistently failed us in the past? Who benefits?

Well, the guru does. I don't buy the idea that religious beliefs are viral "memes." Instead, they are forms of manipulation. Gurus, priests, and preachers benefit in status and wealth if they have believers/followers. They gain power when people believe in their words and the people usually only believe if they are kept ignorant.

There are thousands of little old men on mountaintops in the "guru literature," and they always say things that are so vague that the gullible consider them wise. The easily impressed assume that a guru knows the answer to the question being asked, but wants the inquirer to struggle with the question in order to arrive at some kind of wisdom—and that is why the guru won't give a straight answer. The truth is that he won't give a straight answer because he's clueless. The purpose of ambiguous answers and metaphorical stories is not to convey any message of truth, but to preserve the aura of mystery and wisdom that the guru or master has so carefully cultivated around himself.

By giving shamans and gurus, priests and preachers respect, we help to cultivate future generations of people who believe that spiritualistic forms of thinking are respectable. By doing this, we as a society deprive ourselves of the intellectual capital that could provide real solutions to real problems. The history of scientific understanding can be read like tree rings. Sometimes the rings (additions to scientific understanding) are large and at other times they're small. We should attempt to provide the best type of growing conditions for the scientific enterprise. Trees grow well when there is plenty of water and sunlight, and ideas grow well when the environment favors free inquiry and is uninhibited by dogma or anti-scientific notions. Non-materialist thinkers want us to turn away from the only form of thinking that is helpful to us, and they want us to do so because it benefits them. Logic and science, conversely, benefit all.

CHAPTER 2

ROBERT PIRSIG AND PHILOSOPHICAL ATTACKS ON SCIENCE

[T]he discovery that mathematics is a good language for describing the Universe is about as significant as the discovery that English is a good language for writing plays in.

—John Gribbin (from *Schrodinger's Kittens and the Search for Reality*)

Everything zen, everything zen; I don't think so. —G.W. Bush

Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, deserves a lot of credit for getting a wide readership interested in philosophy; unfortunately he also deserves some of the blame for creating a market in which non-material philosophers and gurus thrive. After reading his book, I found myself thinking about where he went wrong, and eventually wrote an essay about his mistakes. This led me to start reading other pop philosophy and pop science books with the intent of seeing if their authors made the same mistakes as Pirsig.

During that process, I remembered having read, years before I studied logic, a critique of skepticism and science in a Michael Crichton book called *Travels*. At the time I first read Crichton's speech/essay, I thought he made some good points. Upon returning to it, however, the flaws in his arguments were obvious.

Both Pirsig and Crichton are/were (unfortunately, Dr. Crichton recently passed away) hyper-intelligent individuals. But that's beside the point. Logic addresses arguments, not people, and even the hyper-intelligent make mistakes.

Robert Pirsig, author of the wildly popular and perennial bestseller, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, can be seen as the founding father of modern pop philosophy. Pirsig may also be the first modern writer to rework old religious fallacies into mysticism/New Ageism. Many of his errors have been repeated by modern day gurus and shamans like Deepak Chopra. Pirsig's book, first published in 1974, sought to undermine scientific thinking and created a cult-like audience of followers who persist in believing in Pirsig's non-material claims.

Those who doubt Pirsig's continuing influence might consider Mark Richardson's recently released book, *Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The author of *Zen and Now*, like so many of Pirsig's devotees, traveled Pirsig's famous motorcycle route. I too would like to follow Pirsig's path, but with a different intention. I'd like to provide maintenance for his logic. Perhaps debunking Pirsig, even at this late date, will be helpful in addressing the claims of the many pop philosophers and gurus who have begun writing for the niche market that he created.

In the Introduction to the 1999 paperback edition of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Pirsig mentioned schizophrenia. In reference to his own battles with what appears to be some version of split personality disorder, he wrote: "There is a divided personality here: two minds fighting for the same body, a condition that inspired the original meaning of 'schizophrenia.'" The more psychologically correct definition of schizophrenia is the inability of an individual to distinguish between the images in his head and images in the world. When this condition is chronic, it is defined as a mental disorder. When it is selective, we call it faith. Pirsig's philosophical mistakes are all schizophrenic in that he cannot always tell the difference between things that merely exist in the mind and things that exist in the world. New Age philosophers often try to distance themselves from their more dogmatic religious cousins. However, a close examination of Pirsig's writing shows that the errors he makes are carnival-mirror distortions of those that plague religion.

In his book, which Pirsig informs us is a Chataquah, kind of a long philosophical discourse told through an individual narrative, the central

philosophical theme is Pirsig's search for something that falls outside of the traditional philosophical arena. His alter ego "Phaedrus" (Pirsig's personality before a long bout with mental illness) became consumed with the concept of "Quality" and went into a deep cavern of philosophical thought in search of what it meant.

In order to prevent his search from becoming a scientific quest, Pirsig makes a few clumsy attacks on scientific materialism, otherwise known as atheism. Pirsig's brief dismissal of "scientific materialism" aka "atheism" has an outsized importance in his book. Once he has gotten those pesky rules of science out of the way, he is free to meander through the mystical and philosophical caverns until he finds his Quality—a strange trip, given the fact that he doesn't even bother to define it.

Here's a sample passage:

Phaedrus felt that...scientific materialism was by far the easiest to cut to ribbons. This, he knew from his earlier education, was naïve science. He went after it...using the *reductio ad absurdum*. This form of argument rest on the truth that if the inevitable conclusions from a set of premises are absurd then it follows logically that at least one of the premises that produced them is absurd. Let's examine, he said, what follows from the premise that anything not composed of mass-energy is unreal or unimportant.

He used the number zero as a starter. Zero originally a Hindu number, was introduced to the West by Arabs during the Middle Ages and was unknown to the ancient Greeks and Romans. How was that? He wondered. Had nature so subtly hidden the zero that all the Greeks and all the Romans—millions of them—couldn't find it? One would normally think that zero is right out there in the open for everyone to see. He showed the absurdity of trying to derive zero from any form of mass-energy, and then asked, rhetorically, if that meant the number zero was "unscientific." If so, did that mean that digital computers, which function exclusively in terms of ones and zeros, should be limited to just ones for scientific work? No trouble finding the absurdity here. (297-298)

The problem with this passage is that Pirsig reduced the wrong argument to absurdity—his own.

First of all, the number zero was *invented* not discovered, in the same way that Newton invented, not discovered, calculus and Darwin invented, not discovered, evolutionary theory. This does not mean that moving objects began with Newton or that evolution began with Dar-

win, it merely means that humanity finally created language that could describe real world phenomena.

The notion that the Greeks and Romans could not see zero is about as significant as saying that the citizens of a landlocked country could not see a ship. In Charles Seife's wonderful book, *Zero: Biography of a Dangerous Idea*, Seife pointed out that Greek mathematics concerned itself primarily with geometry because it was useful for farming and building. The Greeks could not conceive of negative landholdings, for example. The concept of zero was created sometime during the 5th or 6th century in the Gupta Dynasty when Hindu thinkers began to contemplate the infinite and the void. Gupta mathematics was impressive and the calculations it enabled amounted to a scientific revolution.

This being said, it would not be proper to say that Indian mathematics was right and Greek mathematics was wrong. This would be like saying that the French language is right and German is wrong. What can be said is that Indian mathematics is more *expressive* than Greek.

The Greeks seem not to have spent much time contemplating the infinite or the void, which is why they had no names for them. The Hindus, driven by a religion that encouraged contemplation of such things, did. Similarly, Central African tribesmen could hardly be expected to have a word for snow. Yet snow, the infinite, and the void exist (or in the case of the last, don't exist but the concept does). It is only when cultures become aware of things for which they have no terms are the mathematical and linguistic "names" for them invented or borrowed. This occurs all the time. When Americans first encountered Mexican salsa they adopted not only the sauce but the word for it as well.

If we were given a certain limited amount of sensory data—say the observation of the sun peeking over the horizon every morning—we could develop two different mathematical models, or languages, to describe this phenomenon: the Ptolemaic (Earth centered) and the Copernican (sun centered).

At first, the Ptolemaic view and the Copernican view would both suffice, and there would be no way of saying which better described the observed phenomena. However, let us say that we get a new piece of sensory data, as Galileo did when he used his telescope to see the orbital patterns of the moons of Jupiter, and that one of these models more accurately predicts and describes these new facts; then we would be able to say that one model was the better descriptor of *all* the facts.

The Copernican “theory” is more descriptive of sensory data and gives us a more accurate description of what is really happening in the universe. Thus, it displaced the Ptolemaic version. If we understand this we can see that Zeno’s famous paradox, for example, is not a paradox at all. (Zeno asked how, if you go half the distance to a goal, then half of that distance, then half of that distance, etc., you could ever arrive at the goal.) Zeno was simply showing the Greeks that their mathematics (devoid of zero) had no way of adequately describing movement.

Modern mathematics, far from being a hard objective “thing” is instead a mish-mash of concepts that arose from a process of cultural synthesis (almost entirely in Eurasia, where cultures were easily able to intermesh because of war and trade). The Greeks contributed geometry; the Gupta Indians the numbers 0-9 and the decimal system; the Muslims gave us algebra; the English gave us physics and calculus; and the Germans contributed the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. Each time, a culture’s language was adopted and added not because it was “right,” but because it was more descriptive of objective phenomena and therefore a “better” language.

It is important to note that in his *Chatauqua*, Pirsig devotes several pages to the mathematician Poincaré (1854–1912) and the supposed mathematical crisis of his time, which involved the “discovery” that two different types of mathematical language—one called Lobachevskian and the other Euclidian (which became known as the Riemann)—could be used. Pirsig writes:

We now had *two* contradictory visions of unshakable scientific truth, true for all men of all ages, regardless of their individual preferences. This was the basis of the profound crisis that shattered the scientific complacency of the Gilded Age. *How do we know which one of these geometries is right?* If there is no basis for distinguishing between them, then you have a total mathematics which admits logical contradictions. But a mathematics which admits logical contradictions is not mathematics at all. The ultimate effect of the non-Euclidian geometries becomes nothing more than a magician’s mumbo jumbo in which belief is sustained purely by faith! (335)

We see here that Pirsig is again confused by the nature of mathematics. We cannot ask the question “which of these geometries is right” anymore than we can ask whether Portuguese or Inuit is the “right” lan-

guage. What we can ask, is, which is more descriptive for the sensory data we have? And, a paragraph down, Pirsig answers his own question: “According to the Theory of Relativity, Riemann geometry best describes the world we live in.” (335)

Reification is not a small mistake. Pirsig’s claim that computers run on Leibniz’s binary code, which works through a series of zeros and ones is not helpful. Does he actually think that computers run on concepts? There are no zeros in a computer but rather a series of electrical “holders” that are either electronically switched on or off. Humans simply describe this in terms of zeros or ones. Again, this *description* is subjective.

Once this is understood, all of Pirsig’s philosophy falls apart. Consider this oft-quoted passage of a conversation between him and his son:

...the laws of physics and of logic...the number system...the principle of algebraic substitution. These are ghosts. We just believe in them so thoroughly they seem real.”

“They seem real to me,” John says.

“I don’t get it,” says Chris.

So I go on. “For example, it seems completely natural to presume that gravitation and the law of gravitation existed before Isaac Newton. It would sound nutty to think that until the seventeenth century there was no gravity.”

“Of course.”

“So when did this law start? Has it always existed?”

John is frowning and wondering what I’m getting at.

“What I’m driving at,” I say, “is the notion that before the beginning of the earth, before the sun and the stars were formed, before the primal generation of anything, the law of gravity existed.”

“Sure.”

“Sitting there, having no mass of its own, no energy of its own, not in anyone’s mind because there wasn’t anyone, not in space because there was no space either, not anywhere—this law of gravity still existed?”

Now John seems not so sure.

“If that law of gravity existed,” I say, “I honestly don’t know what a thing has to do to be nonexistent. It seems to me that the law of gravity has passed every test of nonexistence there is. You cannot think of a single attribute of nonexistence that that law of gravity didn’t have. Or a single scientific attribute of existence it did have. And yet it is still ‘common sense’ to believe that it existed.”

John says, “I guess I’d have to think about it.”

“Well, I predict that if you think about it long enough you will find yourself going round and round and round and round until you finally

reach only one possible, rational, intelligent conclusion. The law of gravity and gravity itself did not exist before Isaac Newton. No other conclusion makes sense.

“And *what that means*,” I say before he can interrupt, “and *what that means* is that the law of gravity exists *nowhere* except in people’s heads! It’s a ghost! We are all of us very arrogant and conceited about running down other people’s ghosts but just as ignorant and barbaric and superstitious as to our own.” (41–42)

Again, Pirsig mistakes the law of gravity, a *description*, for a *thing*. Of course the law of gravity could not have existed before there was anything, because without matter objects would not be attracted to each other because there would be no objects. If we define the “law of gravity” as a description of real-world phenomena, in the same way that the word “rock” is used to describe a hunk of granite, then no, the law of gravity did not exist before Newton. However, if we describe the law of gravity as the attraction that objects, depending on weight and distance, have for each other, then of course it existed—just as sound waves came from the falling tree even if no ears were around to hear it.

Pirsig might as well be saying that the word “rock” was floating around in the universe before there were ever rocks, or that poems about flowers existed before there were flowers or poets to write about them. He might as well be Plato looking at the shadows in his cave.

This fallacious thinking is what eventually leads him to this conclusion about his central conceit, which is the search for Quality:

[Q]uality is not just the *result* of the collision between subject and object. The very existence of subject and object themselves is *deduced* from the Quality event. The Quality event is the cause of the subjects and objects, which are then mistakenly presumed to be the cause of the Quality!

Now he had that whole damned evil dilemma by the throat. (304)

Actually, he was just strangling a reification, holding a shadow in a headlock. Because Pirsig so often commits the philosophical sin of reification, he turns something called “Quality,” which is elusive by definition, into a kind of creator god. It existed before matter, apparently. This is like saying that the painting of a mountain created both the painter and the mountain. Quality is a subjective term in that it differs from person to person. The fact that most of us recognize Quality in the same

way is not particularly remarkable given that all DNA-based humans have far more similarities than differences. Neither is it remarkable that separate human civilizations developed mathematics, language, mythologies, and religions. The mistake is reifying the descriptions of these human developments, such as when people mistake their descriptions of gods for actual gods. Pirsig's "philosophy" is different only in degree, not in kind, from the "philosophy" of any other religion.

Understanding Pirsig's elementary mistake—reification of descriptions—is an essential first step in understanding the fallacies of those who follow in his footsteps.