

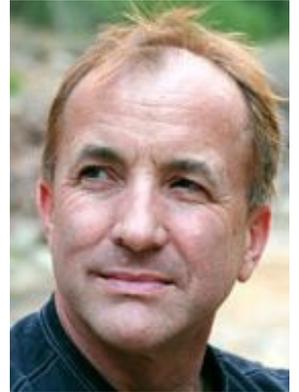
Michael Shermer

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Michael Shermer

Michael Shermer is the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, the Director of the Skeptic Society, the host of the Skeptics' Lecture Series at the California Institute of Technology and the author of a regular column in *Scientific American* called "Skeptic".

Shermer frequently appears in the US media as an advocate of the skeptical point of view. Although he is a historian rather than a scientist, he sees himself as an arbiter of scientific credibility and standard bearer of rational thought. "In a free society, skeptics are the watchdogs against irrationalism. Debunking is not simply a divestment of bunk; its utility is in offering a better alternative, along with a lesson in how thinking goes wrong" (*Scientific American*, June 2001, p. 23).



According to Wikipedia Shermer was once a fundamentalist Christian. Much of his writing concerns the personal experiences that shaped his worldview. He once tried to enhance his athletic abilities with various New Age techniques, such as iridology, rolfing, and mega-vitamins. He even kept a pyramid in his living room to increase energy. His skepticism developed in reaction to his earlier credulity. Shermer now reveals a similarly credulous attitude toward mainstream science itself.

An advocate of "Big Science", in his book *The Borderlands of Science* (2002) Shermer outlines a series of criteria for distinguishing between real science and "baloney". He particularly warns his readers against people who have ideologies to pursue, whose pattern of thinking "consistently ignores or distorts data not for creative purposes but for ideological agendas". Unfortunately he himself has an ideology to pursue and makes untruthful and pseudoscientific claims.

For example, in his "Skeptic" column in *Scientific American* in March 2003, Shermer cited a research study published in *The Lancet*, a leading medical journal, by Pim van Lommel and colleagues. He asserted this study "delivered a blow" to the idea that the mind and the brain could separate. Yet the researchers argued the exact opposite, and showed that conscious experience outside the body took place during a period of clinical death when the brain was flatlined. As Jay Ingram, of the Canadian Discovery Channel, commented: "His use of this study to bolster his point is bogus ... He could have said, 'The authors think there's a mystery, but I choose to interpret their findings differently'. But he didn't. I find that very disappointing." (*Toronto Star*, March 16, 2003).

Pim van Lommel wrote to the editor of *Scientific American* setting out the evidence that Shermer misrepresented. In August 2004, Dr. Petrus Pennanen wrote to point out 'an extremely unscientific statement' in an article by Shermer on telepathy. In November 2004, Professor John Poynton, President of the Society for Psychical Research, wrote to protest that Shermer's activities are a distortion of the concept of skepticism.¹

In relation to Rupert Sheldrake's book *The Sense of Being Stared At*, Shermer claimed in *USA Today* that "the events Sheldrake describes don't require a theory and are perfectly explicable by normal means"(Feb 26, 2003). When asked to substantiate this claim, he was unable to do so and admitted he [had not seen the book](#).

In his August 2004 Skeptic column in *Scientific American*, Shermer launched an extraordinary attack on the widely respected physicist Freeman Dyson, of Princeton. He took exception to the fact that Freeman Dyson publicly concluded that paranormal phenomena might really exist, on the basis of "a great mass of evidence" (*New York Review of Books*, March 25, 2004).

Dyson's error, according to Shermer, was to be interested in people's actual experiences:

"Even genius of this magnitude cannot override the cognitive biases that favour anecdotal thinking. The only way to find out if anecdotes resemble real phenomena is controlled tests. Either people can read other people's minds (or ESP cards), or they can't. Science has unequivocally demonstrated that they can't – QED."

This sounds like a crushing rebuttal of Dyson's view, with the full weight of the authority of science. But it is untrue. There have been many scientific investigations of telepathy, and there is much evidence in its favour.

Shermer is a close associate of the conjurer James Randi. In January 2005 at the Stardust Hotel in Las Vegas, NV they gave a workshop together on how to get the skeptical message across, teaching would-be media skeptics the "tricks of the trade" so that they could be the one the media will call on "when the next UFO or psychic healer appears on the scene."

Note

1. In spite of Shermer's claim to be speaking up for science, some of his views have been severely criticised by readers of *Scientific American*.

More Information

"I just witnessed an event so mysterious that it shook my skepticism."

– Michael Shermer

[Anomalous Events That Can Shake One's Skepticism to the Core](#)

Michael Shermer, *Scientific American*, September 16, 2014

Editors' note:

"Since the miracle aims at restoring the awareness of reality, it would not be useful if it were bound by laws that govern the error it aims to correct."

– *A Course in Miracles*

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P.Z. Myers, *Pharyngula*, January 16, 2013

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