

Prof. Paul Kurtz Receives Klass Award

by Scott Snell

On April 10th I had the honor and pleasure of presenting the 2009 NCAS Philip J. Klass Award for outstanding contributions in promoting critical thinking and scientific understanding to Professor Paul Kurtz, the father of the modern organized scientific skeptical movement. The presentation was made before an international audience of more than 200 at the Center for Inquiry's 12th World Congress at the Hyatt Regency in Bethesda, Maryland. Following my remarks and the presentation of the award, Professor Kurtz screened a segment of a video produced and narrated by Philip Klass during the CSICOP Executive Council's 1988 visit to China, and then Kurtz gave the debut recitation of his "Affirmations of the New Skepticism."

Included here are a transcript of the award presentation and a reproduction of the award dedication handout. Video coverage of the event is available at the NCAS YouTube Channel (YouTube.com/NCASVideo).

Friday, April 10, 2009, 11:30 AM
Hyatt Regency Bethesda

[Toni Van Pelt, Director of Center for Inquiry-DC's Office of Public Policy]:

"It is now my pleasure to introduce to you Scott Snell. He's employed at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. He is a flight software engineer for several Earth-science and astronomy spacecraft, most notably the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe and the upcoming Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter. His previous missions include the Compton Gamma Ray Observatory, a schoolbus-sized spacecraft which he helped safely de-orbit into the South Pacific Ocean at mission's end.

Don't you think that deserves a round of applause? [applause] I think that's fabulous!

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*Professor Paul Kurtz receives Philip J. Klass Award
from NCAS president Scott Snell.*



photo by Brian Engler

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Election Results

Relected and incumbent board members are: W.T. (Tom) Bridgman; Nelson Davis, Jr.; Chip Denman; Grace Denman; Herb M. Federhen; Bing Garthright; Curtis Haymore; J.D. Mack; Renee Madden; Eugene Ossa; Melissa Pollak; Scott Snell, Gary Stone, Jamy Ian Swiss, and Marv Zelkowitz.

Officers are: Curtis Haymore, president; Gary Stone, vice president; Walter Rowe, secretary; and Marv Zelkowitz, treasurer; Chip Denman, spokesperson; Scott Snell, past president. ☞



Join Us For *Drinking Skeptically*



Come to *Jackie's Restaurant* at 8081 Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring on the 2nd Wednesday of every month at 7:00 p.m. to join fellow NCASers for their DC-area *Drinking Skeptically* event. What is *Drinking Skeptically*, you may ask? (You are a skeptic after all; questions are expected.) *Drinking Skeptically* is an informal social event designed to promote fellowship and networking among skeptics, critical thinkers, and like-minded individuals. It gives skeptics a chance to talk, share ideas (and yes, drink) in a casual, relaxed

atmosphere. We discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds. But most of all, we have fun while promoting skepticism, science, and rationality.

Don't drink? Don't let that stop you from joining us! Some of the world's most famous skeptics are teetotalers, and you are welcome!

<http://www.jackiesrestaurant.com>

<http://www.drinkingskeptically.org>

Remember that *drinking skeptically* means drinking responsibly. If there's one thing science has taught us, it's the effects of alcohol on the human body. ☞

Monthly Meeting Times & Places 2010

Saturday, January 9, 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm
National Science Foundation, Room 110
4201 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA (Map)

Saturday, February 13, 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm
National Science Foundation, Room 110
4201 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA (Map)

Saturday, March 13, 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm
National Science Foundation, Room 110

4201 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA (Map)

Saturday, April 10, 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm
Bethesda Library, 7400 Arlington Rd., Bethesda, MD
Near Bethesda metro (map) (directions)

Saturday, May 8, 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm
Bethesda Library, 7400 Arlington Rd., Bethesda, MD
Near Bethesda metro (map) (directions)

Out and About

Our own Chip Denman spoke to an assembly of 80-100 students at the Winston Churchill High in Potomac, MD, at 11:00 a.m. on

December 10, 2009. His topic: "Coincidence, Luck, and Probability: Why We Should Expect the Unexpected."

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prez sez—past

by Scott Snell

Dear NCAS Members:

This is my opportunity to give a documented and heartfelt “thank you!” to our members, volunteers, guest speakers, and board members I worked with during my 2008-2009 term as NCAS president. I’d like to give special kudos to our videographer, J. D. Mack, who singlehandedly made the *NCAS YouTube Channel* a reality. Many of our recent lectures are now an information resource that’s only a mouse click away for anyone in the online world, and eventually some of our classic programs also will be included.

As president I especially enjoyed being a part of the first collaboration between NCAS and our neighbors at Center for Inquiry-DC (see page 1). Our second collaboration (“Science, Magic and Skepticism”/“Heavy Mental”) (see page 12) just took place as we went to press for this issue, and was a great success.

Over the past year I was also busy working on the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO), but when it “relocated” from Earth to the Moon in June, my obligations increased to the point that I couldn’t throw my hat into the ring

when NCAS officers were elected by the board for 2009-2010. But I’ll still be serving on the board, hoping to see many of you at our lectures and *Drinking Skeptically*, and contributing my “Torn from Today’s Headlines” feature to *Shadow of a Doubt* when opportunity allows.

Even at work I remain a part of the skeptical cause. In the course of creating high-resolution images of the entire lunar surface, LRO is sending back photos of the Apollo landing sites, showing the equipment and footpaths the astronauts left behind. Deniers of the Apollo landings will find their absurd claims a little harder to sustain against new data from a new NASA team, although I suppose the deniers will just say LRO is part of the conspiracy that allegedly began over two generations ago.

A skeptic’s work is never done, but NCAS is in great hands with current president Curtis Haymore, the other officers, and you our members. I’m looking forward to our year ahead! ☺

Sincerely,

Scott Snell
Outgoing NCAS President



Lunar Reconnaissance
Orbiter (LRO)

prez sez—present

by Curtis Haymore

Dear NCAS Members:

We are participants in a movement. Science and reasoning and skepticism now get as much attention as NewAge and pseudoscience. Television has its “ghost” and “medium” shows, but not one appears in the top 20 prime-time or cable listings, while science-based crime shows abound and even a science-based comedy is popular (*Big Bang Theory*).

The recent growth in the skeptical movement has been “amazing,” especially to those who have attended James Randi’s *The Amazing Meeting* (TAM) conferences. Movies definitely tend more to the paranormal, but the best-seller lists routinely include science-based books. We are part of something larger, and locally, people are coming together and adding their energy to what we do. We also feel the

importance of community during our *Drinking Skeptically* meetups, the online discussions on *NCAS Share*, and the conversations after lectures.

Occasionally it seems that we might run out of topics for our lecture series—but science keeps growing and silliness keeps being invented. We still need to learn. The current vaccine debates show that the stakes can be high.

We still need to be active. We are working with other groups (the local Center for Inquiry office, for example), our web site gets over a thousand hits a day, and our new *YouTube* videos have almost 300 subscribers. Call me or any Board member with suggestions or ideas for speakers or activities. Help us be your outlet for skepticism and rational thinking. ☺

Sincerely,

Curtis Haymore
NCAS President



Previously he operated the International Ultraviolet Explorer spacecraft at Goddard, a spacecraft described by physicist Freeman Dyson as the one of the most productive science instruments ever created.

Mr. Snell obtained his bachelor's degree in physics and astronomy from the University of Maryland. He was a charter member of the National Capital Area Skeptics, he has served on its board of directors since 1998, and he is the current president. I now give you Scott Snell."

[applause]

[Scott Snell]:

"Thanks, Toni. And thanks to CFI-DC for this opportunity for the National Capital Area Skeptics to honor Paul Kurtz.

The National Capital Area Skeptics, also known as NCAS, is an independent non-profit educational and scientific membership organization formed in 1987 in the Washington, DC area that promotes critical thinking and scientific understanding.

This is the National Capital Area Skeptics' first joint event with CFI-DC, hopefully the first of many in the years ahead. We share a

This morning we honor Paul Kurtz, a man without whom the scientific skeptical movement we know today would look very different, if indeed it would exist at all.

common cause of advocacy for science and reason. A number of NCAS members, including myself, are also Friends of the Center, and we certainly wish you well in your sorely-needed work with the US Congress, the Administration, and others.

Professor Kurtz, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the National Capital Area Skeptics, welcome to the Washington DC area. We hope you'll enjoy your stay here. Please find copies of the award dedication at your tables. I think there might be some on open chairs at the sides and I think we have some things at the back as well.

Today we present an award given in memory of Philip J. Klass. In addition to his work as a leading aerospace journalist and editor for

the magazine *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, he was the world's foremost skeptical investigator of reports of Unidentified Flying Objects, arguably the 20th Century's most tenacious mythology, along with the related claims of alien abductions and government cover-up of UFO information.

Philip Klass was also an original convener of the National Capital Area Skeptics, a valued mentor to us, whose wisdom and clear thinking helped guide our organization in its formative years, now over two decades ago. He helped lay the foundation of the NCAS mission and organization, which remains today essentially as it was in the beginning. In gratitude for his role in founding NCAS, and for his contributions to critical thinking and scientific understanding, we've dedicated this award to him.

This morning we honor Paul Kurtz, a man without whom the scientific skeptical movement we know today would look very different, if indeed it would exist at all. I think we can safely say this: the very strange world of the paranormal that we knew in the early and mid-1970s, before Professor Kurtz formed what is now known as the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, no longer exists unchallenged in public libraries, bookstores, magazines, in newspapers, on television or the Web.

I can personally attest to that strange world of the 1970s, having been a young boy at that time, eager to learn more about the Bermuda Triangle, UFOs, psychic powers, Bigfoot, and ancient astronauts, as well as more genuinely scientific topics. I unwittingly trusted the authors of the only books I could find on those subjects. After all, the binding said, "non fiction," so I assumed that experts had checked the facts! [laughter] At that time, *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine didn't exist, and skeptical works published by Prometheus Books weren't on the shelves of my library or bookstore.

A friend of mine says, "Well, at least we had *Mad* magazine back then!" [laughter] Unfortunately that was usually the best we could find. Certainly *Mad* did skewer psychics and other BS, but was more cynical than critical, and obviously not a source for serious information.

Eventually, thanks to the tireless efforts of Professor Kurtz and others within the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, skeptical works did make their way into the marketplace of ideas. It's a competitive marketplace with the mystery mongers, where perhaps it pays to have a team of skeptics instead of talented skeptical individuals working alone.

Although that marketplace is, we hope, forever changed, our work to help educate the public will never end. Just last week, I was describing my NASA work to my dental hygienist. In June we're launching an unmanned mission to the Moon, called Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter. She asked me, "Are you a Scientologist?" [laughter] I thought she meant "scientist," so I said, "Well, there's a difference between a scientist and a Scientologist." She replied, "Oh I know, it's just that Scientologists are very scientific." [laughter] That ties in pretty well with what Susan Jacoby said [in her keynote address] this morning about Scientologists putting the word "science" in their name and misleading the public.

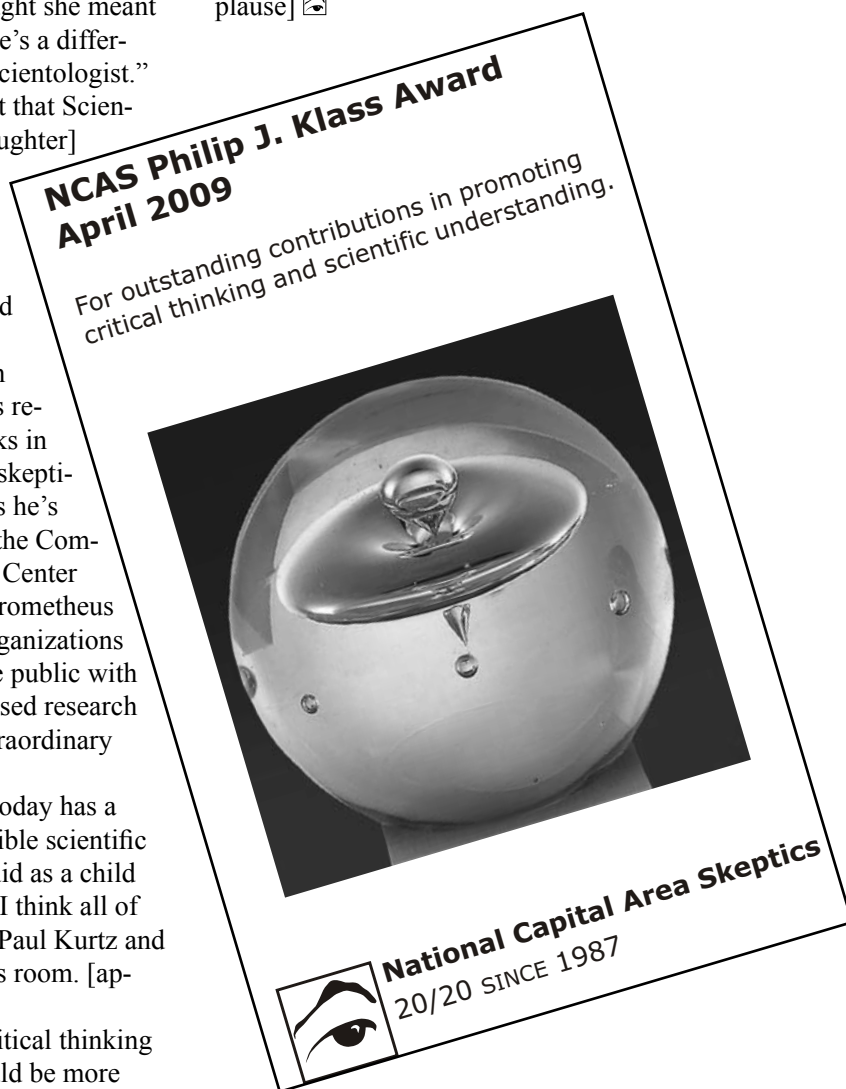
But the world has changed, in spite of this, for the better in this regard since the early 1970s, thanks in large part to Paul Kurtz and the skeptical and freethinker organizations he's founded and chaired, including the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, the Center for Inquiry Transnational, and Prometheus Books. Since the 1970s these organizations have provided the media and the public with results of scientific, evidence-based research on the paranormal and other extraordinary claims.

Because of this, the child of today has a better chance of finding responsible scientific coverage of these topics than I did as a child back in the 1970s. And for that, I think all of us, certainly I personally, thank Paul Kurtz and the other talented skeptics in this room. [applause]

Perhaps no contribution to critical thinking and scientific understanding could be more outstanding than to help teach succeeding generations.

Much is owed to Paul Kurtz as well for the formation of independent local skeptics groups like NCAS. Under his leadership, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry published a call for forming such groups, and provided them with invaluable guidance and material support to connect with other skeptics in their community and organize. And for that, NCAS thanks you as well. [applause]

Professor Kurtz, in remembrance of Philip J. Klass, our mentor, and your friend and colleague, NCAS honors you for your outstanding contributions to critical thinking and scientific understanding with the 2009 Philip J. Klass Award. [removes cover on award; applause] 📺



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About Philip J. Klass (1919-2005)



Philip J. Klass was one of the original conveners of NCAS in 1987 and was an important long-time mentor to our organization. In 1976 he, along with Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, James Randi, Ray Hyman, Martin Gardner, Paul Kurtz, Sidney Hook and others, was a founding member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), now called CSI, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. He was one of the world's foremost experts on UFOs.

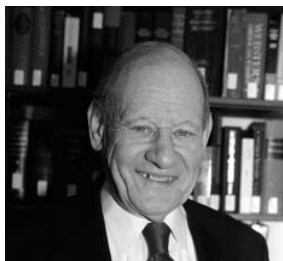
Trained as an electrical engineer, Klass was senior avionics editor of *Aviation Week & Space Technology* for over thirty years. He received numerous awards for his work as a technical journalist, from such organizations as the Aviation/Space Writers Association and the Royal Aeronautical Society, and was named a Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. He wrote one of the first books about spy satellites, *Secret Sentries in Space* (1971).

Klass was known for explaining UFO sightings with pragmatic explanations. Although his detractors styled him a "debunker," in fact, debunking was the consequence, not the purpose, of his efforts. He sought to investigate "flying-saucer" reports and thus convert UFOs (unidentified flying objects) to IFOs (identified flying objects) such as celestial bodies, research balloons, advertising planes, and even secret aircraft. His books on UFOs include *UFOs Explained* (1974), *The Real Roswell Crashed-Saucer Coverup* (1997), and *UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game* (1989).

In 1999, the International Astronomical Union named Minor Planet (asteroid) 7277 "Klass" in his honor.

NCAS created the Philip J. Klass Award in 2006. Previous recipients were Michael Shermer, James Randi, and Robert L. Park.

2009 NCAS Philip J. Klass Award Recipient



Paul Kurtz

Paul Kurtz's accomplishments extend across the realms of philosophy, humanism, publishing, editing, writing, education, the founding and chairing of organizations, and more. A common thread connects all of his achievements: a tireless devotion to improve the human condition by means of rational inquiry and the scientific method. Thus the NCAS Philip J. Klass Award for outstanding contributions in critical thinking and scientific understanding is fittingly presented to Kurtz, the person most responsible for the modern organized scientific skeptical movement that coalesced in the mid-1970s.

Belief in the occult and paranormal was markedly ascendant then, stoked by credulous and sensational media coverage of UFOs, ancient astronauts, psychics, Velikovsky's "worlds in collision," reincarnation, the "Bermuda Triangle," and other unfounded claims.

Kurtz, like many academicians, was troubled by this development, especially the continued uncritical dissemination of astrological charts, forecasts, and horoscopes by the media and by otherwise reputable newspapers, magazines, and book publishers. He, along with astronomer Bart Bok and science writer Lawrence Jerome, sponsored the statement "Objections to Astrology," first published in 1975 in the American Humanist Association (AHA) magazine Kurtz edited, *The Humanist*. Signed by nearly 200 prominent scientists, including 18 Nobel Laureates, the statement was submitted to newspapers across the U.S. and Canada, and attracted worldwide attention.

Encouraged by the success of "Objections," Kurtz formed an international "Committee to Scientifically Investigate Claims of Paranormal and Other Phenomena" (later called CSICOP and now CSI) in 1976. The primary thrust of the committee would be to encourage open, complete, objective, and careful examination of questionable claims concerning the paranormal and related phenomena, and to publish results of such research in its magazine, *Skeptical Inquirer*. The committee was derided by paranormalists for being "closed-minded" and by some skeptics who claimed that it was dignifying phenomena that did not deserve special attention, but the media had

Continued on back

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finally found an organized and effective skeptical voice to include in coverage of the paranormal.

Kurtz co-chaired the committee for its first year and has chaired it ever since. Although preceded by Belgium's Comité Para (founded 1948) and other skeptical organizations, it was CSICOP's eminent coalition of physical and social scientists, medical doctors, magicians, historians, journalists, and others, assembled and energized by Kurtz's dynamic leadership and farsighted vision, that ushered in the modern age of scientific skepticism.

Much is owed to Kurtz as well for the formation of independent local skeptics groups like NCAS. Under his leadership, CSICOP published a call for forming such groups, and provided them with invaluable guidance and material support to connect with other skeptics in their community and organize.

In addition to leading CSI, Kurtz is founder and chairman of Prometheus Books, now in its 40th year of publishing many of the leading authors of skeptical and freethinker works.

Kurtz is the author or editor of 48 books and over 850 articles and reviews, has appeared on major TV and radio programs around the world, been interviewed by and featured in many leading newspapers and magazines worldwide, has lectured widely in North America and overseas, and had papers read at the American Philosophical Association, American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Psychological Association, and other professional associations.

Paul Kurtz is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, chairman of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), and editor-in-chief of its *Free Inquiry* magazine. He is also founder and chairman of the Center for Inquiry, Transnational, comprising CSI, CSH, and other affiliates. Kurtz is a former Co-President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). He received his BA from New York University, and his MA and PhD (1952) from Columbia University, is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Humanist Laureate and President of the International Academy of Humanism.

The National Capital Area Skeptics is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational and scientific membership organization that promotes critical thinking and scientific understanding.

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My Best UFO Investigation

by Bing Garthright

What would you do to investigate a UFO incident? Ever wonder? I learned a few things over a 4-year period as a volunteer UFO investigator between 1975 and 1979.

How It All Began

My interest in UFOs began in 1964 when a fellow grad student loaned me a copy of *The UFO Evidence*, a collection of reports from the National Investigating Committee for Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), now defunct. The distinguished NICAP board members and seemingly inexplicable reports made the UFO puzzle one of my spare-time hobbies. By about 1975, I accepted an invitation from NICAP to become a volunteer regional investigator for Montgomery and Frederick counties in Maryland.

My first flap involved illuminated night-advertising airplanes over Montgomery County. That was not too difficult, but I was bothered that those aviators were not required to inform anyone where they intended to fly. The Montgomery Airpark people were helpful, but could only verify that a night-advertising plane was operating during the weeks in question.

CB Radios Played a Part

Many low-interest investigations followed until CB radio enthusiasts between Brunswick and Jefferson, Maryland, took part in a complicated set of UFO sightings between 9:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. on March 15 and 16, 1976. More than a dozen observers came outdoors to seven locations in response to the CB chatter. Three other NICAP volunteers and I began our investigation with a round of interviews on March 20.

CB enthusiast Brian B. had driven to “the mill,” a popular viewpoint in Brunswick where he could get good CB contact with his friend, Wayne B., about 6 miles east. He had just contacted Wayne at 9:00 p.m. when he noticed a strange light flying about over Wayne’s general area. He asked Wayne to go outside and have a look. Wayne’s view toward Brunswick was limited by a rise in

the field behind his home, so he jogged up the rise to get a clear view. About halfway up the rise, he saw lights heading his way that would have been obscured by the rise before he reached that point. They appeared to be moving rapidly toward him for a second, and then appeared to soar almost vertically up to a much greater altitude at a rate that he found surprisingly fast.

Then the lights stopped and hovered for several seconds. He saw two large red lights, possibly on the bottom of some craft, and a bright white light just left of them. He estimated the red lights to have been about 5 feet in diameter and about 10 feet apart. They appeared to be polygonal, rather than circular, with about 10 sides each. The lights or craft then plunged downward and slightly away from Wayne. The plunge was so rapid that he felt sure that the craft was about to crash. Shaken, he raced up the remaining 40 yards of the slope expecting to see an awful crash. When he reached the crest, he saw the three lights flying away toward Brunswick again, still in their same relative position. Wayne recalled not a sound from the source of the lights. He returned to his house and told Brian what he had seen, using the open CB radio channel.

That began a night of many CB listeners going to multiple viewpoints and noting flying lights. In all, I interviewed more than 12 folks who were willing to contribute what they saw.

The local Smoketown CB Club was very helpful in the investigation, and was instrumental in solving the most striking parts of the night’s reports. These were reported after 10:30 p.m. that night, when a CB user with the handle “P...” reported a 30-foot long football-shaped glowing craft that exploded over a cornfield near a small bridge, with debris falling in the field.



Bing Garthright and James Randi at Jackie’s Restaurant in Silver Springs, MD

photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

Bing Garthright is a retired biostatistician for the foods part of the FDA. After spending a night atop the Physics Building at Duke University looking for UFOs, he went on, regardless, to cop a Ph.D. in mathematics in 1968.



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P also reported other bizarre sightings, and most CB club members passed on all of P's details in addition to what they had personally seen. I had to keep careful distinctions between what people had witnessed and what they had only heard over the CB.

It was 3 weeks later that a club member located P for me. P hadn't revealed his identity over the CB, but used only his CB handle, a common practice at that time. With two volunteer assistants, I went to P's house for an

... most citizens want to observe and to help when a UFO event appears to be going on.

interview. P took me and one of my volunteer assistants to a private part of his house to give me his account, on condition of remaining anonymous. But his wife diverted my other assistant and offered him coffee. While we were getting a stream of earnest lies from P, his wife told the other volunteer a different story.

On March 15, P had been drinking a few and had turned on his CB scanner about 10:00 p.m. When he heard the UFO flap in progress, he recruited a friend to drive him around drinking and looking for UFOs. Finding nothing by 10:30, he began making up things. The most striking impressions on every CBer's mind that night were the lies broadcast by P. Wish I had learned this before I slogged through a very muddy cornfield to find nothing there.

The Probable Cause

The probable explanation of what happened that night arrived months later. It involved some information that I didn't report to NICAP in full detail because it might have damaged military careers. Now, 37 years later, I

... there is no way for an investigator, official or not, to find out what aircraft were in any space not close to a major airport.

assume the officers involved have retired.

An employee of a local secret military communications center told a local law enforcement officer that the son of a high-ranking military officer had gone rafting on the Potomac, probably intending to finish at

Brunswick's boat ramp or nearby park. The son failed to turn up when expected, and was still unaccounted for long after night fell. The officer sent out a military copter with amazing searchlight capabilities, against all regulations, to search the river and surrounding fields for the boy.

This copter, stationed at a secret communications center, was probably an unusually fast "jet" copter, and had searchlights that no civilian had ever experienced. I think this accounted for the initial Brian-Wayne sightings. In addition, what I surmise to be a helicopter was plainly seen at 10:00 p.m. over the Potomac from the bridge at Brunswick, "just hanging in mid-air" above tree-top level, with big white lights on the bottom, a big red light on the top, and little white lights all around it. The witness thinks he observed it hovering about a half-mile downstream for perhaps 5 minutes. It was still hovering when he drove on over to the mill to join Brian. Many other well-meaning reports, of blurs of lighted mist, other aircraft, and surprising sounds overhead, had reasonable but different conventional explanations.

Lessons Learned?

So what lessons did this extensive, several-week, multi-observer incident teach me? First, most citizens want to observe and to help when a UFO event appears to be going on. That's not surprising, but it colors their observations. If some of the observers, far removed from the original location at the mill, saw any light moving anywhere, they reported it to the CB scanners for possible interest. That was just being part of the team. The requirement for great strangeness was not necessary under those conditions.

Second, there is no way for an investigator, official or not, to find out what aircraft were in any space not close to a major airport. Private and public aircraft fly all over at night and don't submit records to anyone. Even public agencies are not interested in detailed location information of their aircraft. They mostly record time aloft, who was in command, and any specific incidents such as rescues. The Maryland state police were willing to tell me that they had a helicopter out searching for "a lost child" during the sightings, but would say only that the location was too far from the sightings

to be responsible for them. They would not tell me the location of the flight so that I could form my own opinion. Military flight records are not released.

Third, one phenomenon that probably factored in several of the Brunswick reports also cropped up in other UFO sightings I investigated. There is a surprising change in apparent size of an airplane headlight or helicopter searchlight when it is shining directly toward your eye and then turns away. It can appear that a large glowing object has sped straight away from you at stunning speed and then suddenly stopped. I watched planes circling landing fields at night and saw the effect many times myself. Under conditions of great excitement, it would be easy to misinterpret this effect as a physics-defying maneuver.

Finally, when and why did I abandon UFO investigations? Around 1978, Alan Hendry spoke at the Smithsonian about his new book, *The UFO Handbook*, issued by Allen Hynek's Center for UFO Studies. Alan made clear that

There is a surprising change in apparent size of an airplane headlight or helicopter searchlight when it is shining directly toward your eye and then turns away.

the frequency of strange aspects of the 800 sightings that he couldn't explain over a period of time was roughly the same in the 800 or so that he did explain. Even the frequency of mysterious car engine failures and of pilots seen waving from windows in craft was about the same. Therefore, there was no signal in the noise.

No Extraordinary Evidence

Hendry's work, and my own investigations, proved to me that individual human testimony in uncontrolled situations is too unreliable to be extraordinary evidence. This sad lesson is the hardest of all to live with, and all investigators of unusual events wish it were not so. Some folks might never come to terms with it. I did. ☒

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Thank you for your new or renewed membership in NCAS.

Science, Magic and Skepticism: A Natural Relationship

- ♠ *D.J. Grothe: The History of Magic in Skepticism*
- ♣ *Chip Denman: Séance Spooks and the Scientists who Investigated Them*
- ♦ *Jamy Ian Swiss: The Illusion of Psychic Powers*

Join world-renowned magician Jamy Ian Swiss, host of *Point of Inquiry* radio/podcast D.J. Grothe, and statistician Chip Denman as they examine the similarities between magic and skepticism, and demonstrate the illusion of psychic powers.

1:00 to 5:30 p.m., Saturday, October 24, 2009

AAAS Auditorium, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington DC

Sponsored by Center for Inquiry DC and The National Capital Area Skeptics.

Chip Denman, Jamy Ian Swiss, D.J. Grothe, and Melody Hensley



photo by Bruce F Press Photography

Melody Hensley, Executive Director of CFI-DC, and Curtis Haymore, president of NCAS, cohosts of the event, welcome attendees and introduce the speakers



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa



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♠ *D.J. Grothe: The History of Magic in Skepticism*



photo by Bruce F Press Photography



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa



Expert advice from magicians is available to serious researchers in the field of paranormal research. They would do well to take advantage of it if they do not, they may find themselves in the company of the rather large number of academics who have learned, too late, of their own vulnerability.

- James Randi



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♣ *Chip Denman: Séance Spooks and the Scientists who Investigated Them*



photo by Bruce F Press Photography

Chip Denman, Jamy Ian Swiss, and D.J. Grothe



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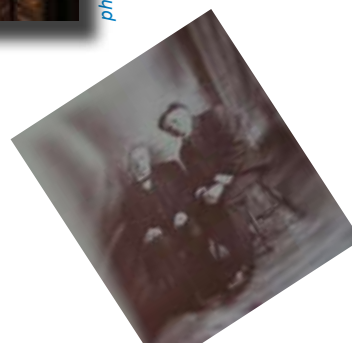
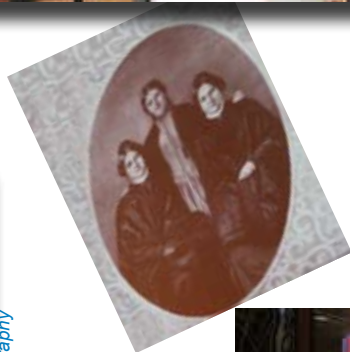


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Bing Garthright



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D.J. Grothe, Chip Denman, and Jack



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♦ *Jamy Ian Swiss: The Illusion of Psychic Powers*



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D.J. Grothe, Chip Denman, and Jamy Ian Swiss



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Chip Denman and Jamy Ian Swiss



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

Heavy Mental: Jamy Ian Swiss



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

Jamy Ian Swiss presents a program of baffling, unnerving, “mind reading” phenomena accomplished with pure psychology, subtle influence, deft illusion, uncanny intuition, and healthy dose of downright deception—what Jamy likes to call “sleight of mind.”

If there were such a thing as psychic powers, it would have to look like this.

Jamy Ian Swiss

Thoughts read.

Minds blown.

7:30 p.m., Saturday, October 24, 2009
AAAS Auditorium
1200 New York Avenue NW
Washington DC



photo by Bruce F Press Photography

Tami Mueller and Jamy Ian Swiss



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photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

Jamy Ian Swiss Heavy Mental



Thoughts read.
Minds blown.
If there were such a thing
as psychic powers, it would
have to look like this.



Jamy Ian Swiss presents a
program of baffling, mesmerizing
mental reading, mind power,
psychic healing, mind pathways,
self-healing, mind control, intuition,
and healing from a powerful
demonstration of mind.
7:30PM, Saturday October 24, 2009
AAAS Auditorium, 1200 New York Ave NW, Washington DC
More information and registration:
www.jamyswiss.com/na-cps-dm

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CFI
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October 24, 2009
7:30 PM
AAAS Auditorium



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Sir Isaac Newton: The Alchemist

by Richard Dengrove



Godfrey Kneller's 1689 portrait of Isaac Newton (aged 46) from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton

Newton has been surrounded by a scandal that has lasted for several centuries: he practiced alchemy, at least until he went off to London to become a Warden of the Mint. His biographers haven't known what to make of it. In 1855, Sir David was completely perplexed how Newton could have stooped to alchemy. In 1958, Marie Boas and A.R. Hall argued it could have had nothing to do with his science.

No one disputes that he was interested in alchemy, because he wrote 650,000 words on it, mostly copying what earlier alchemists had written. He wanted to learn their secrets. Michael Maier was a favorite. Also, he copied the likes of Michael Sendivogius, Eirenaeus Philalethes, Basil Valentine, and Hermes Trismegistus. These alchemists spread their alchemical "wisdom" allegorically, *i.e.*, in code. This came not only in the form of text, but pictures, which Newton copied too.

Why do we consider alchemy a pseudo-science, the opposite of Newton's great achievements? Why do we consider it a scandal that Sir Isaac was an alchemist? Because alchemists sought to make gold and the elixir of immortality, chimeras beyond their reach. From the Middle Ages on, many men were reputed to have lost their fortunes seeking these wonders. That was why people ridiculed alchemy in Newton's day. To a great extent, the memory of it is why we ridicule alchemy today.

That hasn't been only the reason why we ask: How could Newton have lowered himself? Another is the company he kept.



A mixed lot: on the one hand, Michael Maier (1568-1622) was respectable as far as dabblers in alchemy went. He was the physician, and a counselor, to the very occult Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph II. He also brought classical learning into his many alchemical allegories.

On the other hand, some of the writers Newton copied were impostors and forgers: *e.g.*, Eirenaeus Philalethes and Basil Valentine. Others were mythical: *e.g.*, Hermes Trismegistus. Additionally, they were mystics who, we would think, would have nothing in common with either science or Newton.

There is a third reason why we ask how Newton could have lowered himself: the philosophy behind his alchemy. Each alchemist definitely had theoretical foundations to his own madness. Some have claimed we don't know what Sir Isaac's alchemical philosophy was. It is true he kept his alchemical experiments a secret, even more than other alchemists. His notes were made for him alone, and have been impenetrable to modern scholars. His nephew, Humphrey Newton, who helped him with his experiments, claimed Sir Isaac told him nothing.

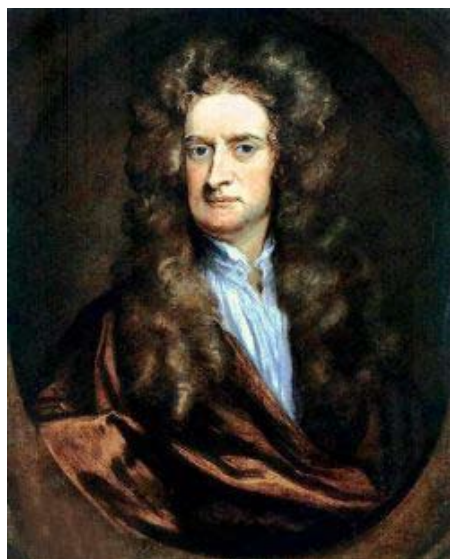
Nonetheless, I believe we can still ascertain Newton's alchemical philosophy. When Newton wrote about natural philosophy, he was not shy about the using alchemical terms and concepts, like Vegetation, Ferment, Spirit, Aether, and the Active Principle, to describe what he was doing.

This brings us to something else that skeptics would object to: Newton's philosophy claimed God had an extensive presence in nature. When humans, animals, and minerals grew, God, or his intermediaries, were doing it. Yes, minerals grew, and that had a lot to do with their possible transmutation into gold.

Also, when atoms or planets attracted or repelled, like in orbit, prisms, and chemicals, God, *et al.*, were doing it too. If this sounds like Intelligent Design, it's no accident: it was close to its kissing cousin, the 18th century "Argument by Design."

Thus, skeptics can't help looking aghast





at what others ignore, Newton's alchemical philosophy. As hard as it may be, I ask you to look at Newton's alchemy not as we would, but as Newton did; to walk in his moccasins, as it were. We will start with his objectives for practicing alchemy. Some people give idealistic reasons why Newton didn't seek to make gold or the elixir of life. I doubt they matter.

There are more practical reasons why he eschewed them as immediate objectives. I suspect that Newton knew he wasn't on the verge of making gold or the elixir of life. It was his hallmark not to go beyond the evidence, and he knew science progressed in increments. In fact, he had admitted to Robert Boyle in the early days that he was far from transmutation.

About the alchemists Sir Isaac used, I doubt it mattered to him whether they were forgers or myths. He took an approach to documents completely unlike ours. Typically, he believed documents were inadequate because much knowledge had been hidden—for good reason.

For him, the best method was verifying alchemists' writings experimentally. Then it could not be argued they were not in possession of a secret. He probably copied the alchemists he did because their works most closely approached his results. Such thinking was not unknown at his university, Cambridge, as an approach to history.

About God, or his intermediaries, causing motion, all natural philosophers believed it then. Unlike our era, religion dominated. An-

cient philosophy was an important influence, too. In fact, Aristotle probably inspired the idea. Newton only differed in the way God, or his intermediaries, brought about motion.

Of course, Newton's natural philosophy, which embraced alchemy, was more important to him than a mere preference. Since his acclaimed discoveries concerned the attraction and repulsion of atoms and planets, he probably thought they were based, to a great extent, on alchemy.

Based on this reasoning, we can conclude that Newton's achievements were based on his alchemy. While we may disagree with him on his alchemical conclusions, I am sure that is what he believed.

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to the Newton
apple tree, to the
propeller beanie.
He has published
numerous articles
in The Skeptical
Eye.*



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

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