Piltdown, Paradigms, and the Paranormal

KENNETH L. FEDER

Pseudoscience is a polymorphous enterprise; the range of pseudoscientific claims is enormous. The world would be far different from what orthodox science supposes if there were substantive validity to the assertions of psychics, astrologers, clairvoyants, past-life therapists, UFOlogists, ancient astronaut enthusiasts, dowsers, creationists, pyramidologists, crystal boosters, faith healers, and the holders of myriad other beliefs in the paranormal, occult, and supernatural.

The claims made by the proponents of these various phenomena or perspectives are more than merely extreme. They, to varying degrees, fundamentally challenge existing paradigms—the ways we view the world around us or some specific aspect of the universe or reality. Within the framework of scientific discourse, however, it cannot be said that the claims made by parapsychologists and occultists are impossible simply because they sound improbable or because acceptance would alter the way we view reality. Certainly concerned scientists need to assess individual cases. The pages of this journal have seen many successful attempts to show specifically why some of these claims are pseudoscientific.

As Al Seckel (1986) has pointed out, however, refuting or debunking individual claims, though important, is simply not enough. There are always other claims. Refuting the myth of the Bermuda Triangle, for example, does not necessarily lead to a recognition of the pseu-
Paleontological skeptics in the early years of the twentieth century were certainly justified in asking for more than a single, seemingly inexplicable piece of evidence before evolutionary paradigms were rewritten. The scientific skeptics among us are similarly justified in asking for something more than has been provided before we overturn our view of reality. Until then, claimed evidence for ESP, telekinesis, clairvoyance, and the rest will remain the equivalent of *Hominid* données.

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References

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Kenneth L. Feder is in the Department of Anthropology, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, Connecticut 06050.