

**Pics or It Didn't Happen:
Sexist Hyperskepticism in the Modern Skeptical Movement**

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Bio:

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Abstract:

In the skeptical community, there is an ongoing conflict over what—if any—actions are necessary to make the movement more welcoming to the growing numbers of women in its ranks. This conflict has brought a great deal of antifeminist sentiment to the surface, to include rape and death threats against prominent women who speak affirmatively on feminist issues within organized skepticism. The origins of this problem can be found in the grounding of skeptical dialogue on the superiority of a traditionally masculinized ideal of science and reason, which excludes the feminized personal narratives that serve as evidence for mistreatment of women within the community. Rhetoric, sociological studies, and close reading will provide a theoretical basis from which to approach this problem, making it possible to reconcile the skeptical commitment to evidence-based conclusions and the lived experience of women who have experienced harassment.

Introduction

It can be difficult to find where misogyny starts. Like all such problems, it roiled beneath the surface of the skeptical community, waiting for an opportunity to present itself and inaugurate the painful-yet-inevitable struggle that it heralded. Skeptics, with their focus on rationality and scientific method, began by centering their criticism on pseudoscience and the unproven claims of alternative medicine. Considering that skeptics pride themselves on their ability to see the underlying falsehoods within what they view as a remarkably uncritical society, it is surprising that it took so long for so many of them to see what was right beneath their noses, for good or ill. However, it would be unfair to say that no skeptics saw what was coming. There had been rumblings for months, years; dissatisfied parties became more and more vocal and unwilling to quietly tolerate what they viewed as mistreatment, as erasure, as harassment, and finally a great outcry arose. Sexism and misogyny, so common within a society unforgiving to skeptical thinking and to women's existence as equals, became a topic that was up for discussion among skeptics, and the storm finally crashed in, thundering the wrath of feminists and antifeminists alike, promising that, regardless of the victors, the skeptical movement would never be the same again.

Elevatorgate

If there was a definite starting point, it was four words spoken by Rebecca Watson in June of 2011: "Guys, don't do that." The video in which they originally appear is innocent enough; its title, "About Mythbusters, Robot Eyes, Feminism, and Jokes," does not herald a feminist apocalypse or a time bomb waiting for an excuse to explode in the faces of the internet's atheists. In it Watson, a founder of the *Skepchick* website and a prominent figure in the atheist and skeptical movement, discusses a number of topics: she narrates her experience visiting the

set of a *Mythbusters* episode, expresses her affection for her viewers, and gives details of talks she has been a part of at conferences. One of these talks just so happens to have been on the topic of women's place in the skeptical movement, and part of the talk was a request for the men at conferences not to treat women as if they are there in the capacity of sexual objects rather than as skeptics in their own right. Afterwards, while drinking at a hotel bar with some other attendees of the conference, Watson announced at four that morning that she was tired and she was going back to her room. She entered an elevator, only to find herself sharing it with a man who had been at the bar but had not spoken to her there. According to Watson, he asked her not to take his request "the wrong way," and then asked her to come back to his hotel room for coffee because he found her "interesting." While Watson politely refused the request with no resistance on the part of the man in the elevator, she thought the incident was worth addressing in the video in light of the fact that requests for a private cup of coffee are frequently thinly-veiled sexual advances and that she had explicitly discussed her discomfort with being sexualized earlier in the day. Reminding her audience of these things, she spoke the fateful words: "Just a word to the wise, here, guys...uh, don't do that." With these words, the skeptical movement—which had previously appeared to be united in pursuit of a more secular and skeptical society—ruptured, and there was something new to discuss.¹

If the unity of the secular movement had been a given prior to what has now been named Elevatorgate, then the question of what, precisely, was hidden beneath that unity was answered with devastating precision in its wake. This video and the culture it implicates has become a point of serious contention for both many relatively anonymous atheist commenters on the internet as well as for some of the most prominent faces of secularism. While anonymous commenters have provided their typical fare of insult-laden responses, the hostility has not been

restricted to anonymous commenters on the internet. Shockingly, Richard Dawkins—who is possibly the most prominent figure in the movement—addressed the matter as well by creating a “response” to an anonymous, hypothetical Muslim woman:

Dear Muslima

Stop whining, will you. Yes, yes, I know you had your genitals mutilated with a razor blade, and . . . yawn . . . don't tell me yet again, I know you aren't allowed to drive a car, and you can't leave the house without a male relative, and your husband is allowed to beat you, and you'll be stoned to death if you commit adultery. But stop whining, will you. Think of the suffering your poor American sisters have to put up with.

Only this week I heard of one, she calls herself Skep"chick", and do you know what happened to her? A man in a hotel elevator invited her back to his room for coffee. I am not exaggerating. He really did. He invited her back to his room for coffee. Of course she said no, and of course he didn't lay a finger on her, but even so . . .

And you, Muslima, think you have misogyny to complain about! For goodness sake grow up, or at least grow a thicker skin.

Richard ²

Dawkins' comment, however startling it may have been, and however girding it may have seemed to those who took such fierce pleasure in slinging gendered insults at Watson, embodies many of the arguments made by her opponents. More importantly, however, its application by a prominent figure in the movement requires a closer look at the ways in which the movement has potentially built in the same patriarchal values that underlie the surrounding culture.

Skepticism and Atheism

If the skeptical movement is going to create itself as a force to be reckoned with in a still-believing world, it must address its more problematic stances. Although outsiders may hear the word “skeptic” as a euphemism for “atheist,” atheism is actually a rather new and unfamiliar force within the still poorly-defined group that has arisen with scientific skepticism as its organizing principle. Astronomer Carl Sagan offered a nugget of skeptical wisdom when he said, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” There is significant conflict, however, as to what manner of claims skeptics should apply this logic, which means that there is not even agreement on what, precisely, constitutes the skeptical community at large. There is also a discussion as to whether the principles of skepticism, as outlined by Sagan’s statement, should apply to issues other than pseudoscience, alternative medicine, and the relatively new issue of the existence of supernatural entities. One example of this dialogue appeared online in 2010, when one blogger responded unhappily to the number of atheist panels at a skeptical conference. When told that the conference discussed atheist topics largely because most attendees were interested in atheism, the blogger posited that “to conflate atheism with skepticism dilutes atheism and destroys skepticism.”³ In response to this attitude, PZ Myers, a prominent skeptical atheist blogger and evolutionary scientist, provides an impassioned reply: “Science and skepticism are...tools...It is not [conflation of skepticism and personal agendas] when you use that tool to investigate god-claims...any more than it is when you use those tools to rip into [pseudoscientific claims].”⁴

Although many skeptics also identify as atheists, there is still no consensus on whether organized skepticism should accept skepticism of faith-based claims—which are by their very nature outside the purview of science—as a part of its agenda. Whether supernatural claims are considered extraordinary depends upon which skeptic is doing the consideration, in the end, and

this boundary is far from drawn; however, the discussion of whether the skeptical movement should attempt to make itself more welcoming to women, and perhaps even incorporate feminist viewpoints within its agenda, is largely between atheist skeptics working towards a more scientifically literate and secular society. Because of the ideological locus of this dialogue, and although these terms are not necessarily interchangeable outside of this dialogue, in reference to the discussion of gender within the community, the terms “skeptic/al,” “atheist,” and “secular/ist” are interchangeable in reference to the people who have formed communities around these terms.

Skepticism as an organized entity that exists for the purpose of promoting secular values and reducing the influence of both religion and pseudoscience upon society is a product of a burgeoning white male atheist population, and the values that it espouses reflect this demographic imbalance. The number of atheists in the United States, at the very least, is on the rise, as the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life from 2007 documents, but the number of atheists in the USA remains low relative to those in other industrialized nations.⁵ The statistical insignificance of the group of people who self-identify as atheist is compounded by the fact that atheists suffer from significant demonization in society. The overwhelmingly theistic society in which American atheists function is prone to scapegoating atheists as immoral due to their nonbelief in deities, leaving them entirely the Other—defined solely by their position as separate from an internally-defined norm—in a society that highly prizes morality as a benchmark for worthiness as a citizen.⁶ Atheists who choose to participate in the skeptical movement, however, reject the initial assumption that belief in God is the prerequisite for ethical behavior and, as such, require secular bases for values. Science provides a uniting, preestablished framework with significant credibility for those who wish to determine their moral code without the assistance of

sources that they consider unreliable at best and nonexistent at worst.⁷ Of crucial importance, however, is the fact that this worldview, as any other, is a lens that will only be able to see what is within its focus.

Feminism and Skepticism

Feminists for decades have challenged the common societal misconception that men are more rational than women and hence more prone to scientific and skeptical thinking about the world around them. This societal misconception is reflected in ongoing problems within the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), which are still largely composed of men who sometimes demonstrate scientifically shoddy reasoning in order to justify retroactively the paucity of women within STEM. The use of bad science by actual scientists problematizes the use of science as a gauge for what to expect of women within the skeptical movement, which depends heavily upon science to justify its morality and logic. When STEM practitioners or members of the organized skeptical movement defend their methods and results or try to persuade others that skepticism is a superior position they engage in rhetoric. Because the arguments for scientific skepticism are inherently rhetorical, classical rhetoric provides an interesting framework through which to view the belief in “objective” and “subjective” via the social norm of prioritizing extrinsic evidence and logos over intrinsic evidence and, in particular, pathos, the latter of which is an absolutely crucial tool in the formation of convincing arguments. The relative unclarity of what is an appropriate application of skepticism, the limited application of science due to its status as an excellent tool in the hands of often-fallible human beings, and the ways in which the gendering of rhetorical tools potentially renders skeptics ineffective as rhetors all contribute to create a movement that is held hostage to gender essentialism and misogyny.

Atheism, when paired with an identity rooted in scientific skepticism, has what Kenneth Burke would call a “trained incapacity” to see proofs that are rooted in unscientific, unprovable means, which happen to include narratives from personal experience. According to Burke,

The problems of existence...are open to many interpretations—and these interpretations in turn influence our selection of means. One adopts measures in keeping with his past training—and the very soundness of this training may lead him to adopt the wrong measures.⁸

The simplest application of this concept can be found in the common saying: “When all you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail.” This mode of seeing—which prizes the rational as an intellectual and moral underpinning—is by its very nature incapable of seeing what value may lie within other frameworks or modes of experiencing the world. The hammer of skepticism can turn into such a dogmatic viewpoint that all claims, regardless of their potential, become the axiomatic nails. Skeptics employ language that frequently reflects this trained incapacity when they reject narratives from personal experience even though there is often no scientifically-grounded basis for discerning whether women have experienced sexual harassment.

Like every other person or group, secularists employ rhetoric in defense of their cause and in order to gird themselves against attacks from the world around them, and the ways in which they use rhetoric are illuminating as to the ideology that they espouse. Although many skeptics would find the characterization of their perspective as an ideology offensive, skepticism-as-worldview fits certain definitions of the word and cannot be discussed without being addressed as such. Ideology is, according to Sharon Crowley, “the medium within which beliefs are articulated with one another.”⁹ While nonbelief in gods is, by definition, not a belief,

there are other views that underpin modern skepticism that are safe to characterize as beliefs: society will benefit from increased focus on proper science education; no claim is safe from critical scrutiny; “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” Those beliefs are, as is their wont, expressed through commonplaces: commonly-held viewpoints within a system that are so ubiquitous to membership within that group that it is unnecessary to give voice, excepting when the values of the community are under attack from opposing values. As such, commonplaces serve to denote the members of a group and the Others who are outside of the group. Since skepticism is predicated upon “the dialogue of science and reason,”¹⁰ one of the bedrock commonplaces among skeptics is that rationality and logic are superior to emotion for the purposes of discerning truth from falsehood. While this idea is generally beneficial, it falls prey to the same lack of nuance that most commonplaces do when used without consideration for social context. This lack of nuance provides a key to understanding the direct privileging of traditionally Western, traditionally masculine values for evidence and information and, consequently, the indirect privileging of white, male bodies within the secular movement.

The underlying meanings of skeptical commonplaces serve to marginalize more than the privileged religious majority against whom they are most often employed. The framing of emotion as the Other in conjunction with the rendering of women as overly emotional can predispose men in the movement to perceive women’s arguments from experience about issues that tend to include emotional responses as invalid, thus muting their participation within the movement when they try to discuss their own experiences. Rationality and logic as superior to emotion when making decisions, and in particular decisions about what to accept as true, would appear to be a benign value. Reason is, after all, important to determining whether or not a decision or value is in the best interests of the individual or group that accepts it. This premise,

however, begins to unravel when considering the fact that rationality, as a term, is understood to mean vastly different things from person to person, and thus does not necessarily function as a coherent term for skeptics to unite around. Indeed, the framing of rationality has been largely masculinized since the Enlightenment, when this particular debate was posited as “male rationality versus female emotionality.”¹¹ The positioning of rationality as inherently masculine and emotion as inherently feminine elides the distinction between gender and innate ability, and creates a situation in which skeptics, despite their purported objectivity, confuse the linguistic map for the factual territory, rendering women emotional and men rational without consideration of individual variation. The predication of the skeptical movement upon these Enlightenment values results in a situation in which women go unrecognized as skeptical thinkers due to their relative invisibility; after all, if their nonexistence is built into common understanding of the language itself, it is very difficult indeed to value their contributions.

The lack of recognition of women as skeptical thinkers is starkly shown in the bodies that largely populate the atheist movement and in particular in the bodies that are at the top of its unofficial hierarchy. It is difficult to obtain precise information as to the gender and racial makeup of the skeptical movement in the United States; however, there are several sources that at least hint towards a cogent identity. The atheist and agnostic population ranges from anywhere from 1.6 to 6 percent of the population, depending upon the poll in question and, although few of the polls separate the data for atheists and agnostics from the data for the religious unaffiliated—which is a very different and diverse classification as far as belief in the supernatural is concerned—the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey found that seventy percent of atheists identified as male.^{12, 13} Two online censuses substantiate the idea that a majority of self-identified atheists are male: the self-selecting Atheist Census, in which seventy-four percent of

respondents identify as male,¹⁴ and the Secular Census, in which 57.5% are male.¹⁵ Although there are variations in the divisions between women, men, and nonbinary genders in the surveys, the overall picture is one of a largely male-dominated population.

Four Horsemen of the Atheist Apocalypse

The most popular public figures in atheist activism convey this image to the world. There are four men who have been grouped together in the public eye as the Four Horsemen of the Atheist Apocalypse, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the ways in which the looming specter of a growing atheist minority threatens theistic society. These four horsemen are Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist who writes extensively on scientific topics and secular advocacy; Daniel Dennett, a philosopher who writes of the moral underpinnings of atheism; Sam Harris, a neuroscientist who advocates for a morality that derives from science; and the late Christopher Hitchens, a popular writer on the harm done by religion. These four white men are, for the most part, the public face of atheism to those who may be unfamiliar with the movement, although there are a number of other relatively well-known figures within the movement and there is much greater diversity at the lower levels of atheist activism. A casual reader, curious about the tenets of New Atheism, would be likely to pick up a copy of Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, or Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, as many nascent atheists have done over the years; different editions of these two books constitute the top three books sold in the atheism category by Amazon.¹⁶ Upon finding themselves curious about the authors, however, they may wish to peruse further information about the worldviews held by such prominent leaders in the movement.

While both men use the degradation of women within their books as one of their justifications for the eradication of religion, both are curiously silent at best and hostile at worst

to the concerns of women within their own culture. A woman wishing to enter the skeptical movement as a full participant not only faces the potential of receiving comments from anonymous parties such as those Watson has received; she also faces a Dawkins who is willing to appropriate the struggles of oppressed Muslim women in order to voice his own disapproval of Western feminists, or a Hitchens who was willing to dismiss women as not having evolved to have a sense of humor and who would never let “a woman of his” work.¹⁷ The maleness of the public faces of atheism functions as a physical and symbolic reminder to women of their otherness, denoting worldviews that constitute a hostile environment for a generation of women nonbelievers accustomed to feminist thought. If taken at face value, this environment may push them away before they have the opportunity to shape the movement for themselves. Organized atheism, however, is not the only community that is dealing with the conflict between the socialized masculine and feminine, standards of evidence, and what does and does not constitute a valid epistemological framework from which to approach the world.

Women in Science

The valorization of science as a method of obtaining information about the world—if not as the sole valid method for obtaining information about the world—is integral to skepticism as a worldview. Because of the vitality of this framework to the scientific atheism, it is crucial for skeptics to be willing to apply their critical facilities to the problems that the scientific establishment is facing in regards to accepting women as equal participants, which places into question any unqualified trust of human-inflected science as an unbiased arbiter of truth. Lawrence Summers, the former president of Harvard University, spoke for many people when, in 2005, he made the controversial statement that the difference in involvement between men and women in science was founded upon “issues of intrinsic aptitude, and particularly of the

variability of aptitude.” The idea that men and women are fundamentally different in terms of aptitude in STEM fields is pernicious, and is often based upon the sentiment, as Summers articulated, that men exist on the far ends of a bell curve of aptitude, where women are more likely to be mediocre than to either be brilliant or incapable of learning.¹⁸ While this opinion is not uncommon, is it particularly disheartening to hear it emerge from the mouth of someone who was, at that time, the president of one of the most prestigious universities in the nation.

The first step to a career in science is through education; as such, the policies of universities in regards to gender equity are extremely important to ensure as equal a playing field as possible for women in science. However, a recent study presented laboratories with applications that were identical except for the gender of the name of the supposed applicant. Laboratories consistently rated the male students as “significantly more competent and hireable than the (identical) female applicant.” The effects of this sort of attitude are tangible even in the study, as “these participants also selected a higher starting salary and offered more career mentoring to the male applicant.”¹⁹ If skeptics are to be thorough in their application of skepticism, is it absolutely necessary for them to question the ability of the scientific establishment to provide an objective perspective on the capabilities of women and accept the possibility that science, however wonderful it may be at providing ontological details of non-controversial topics, has the potential to reflect the bias of its human practitioners when it goes afield into the domain of social issues. To accept this premise, however, would require also accepting the ideologically risky premise that no person or field is capable of consistent objectivity.

The tendency to wish to believe in objectivity as a possible human trait is also visible in the societal preference for proofs that would fall under the rubric of extrinsic proofs as opposed

to intrinsic, as framed in classic rhetorical terms. Extrinsic proofs, as Sharon Crowley and Deborah Hawhee define them, are those which “are found in the rhetorical situation,” and include “facts, data, artifacts, and the testimony of authorities and witnesses.”²⁰ Crowley and Hawhee assert that “facts and testimony are virtually the only proofs discussed in modern rhetorical theory,”²¹ as can be seen in any online discussion that ends with the statement, “Pics or it didn't happen.” Skeptics prefer this sort of evidence as well, appreciating the ability to provide an objective analysis of a given situation without letting the irrationality of sentiment cloud their impression of what is and is not true. However admirable this sentiment may be, it rather unskeptically ignores the reality of the frequently unacknowledged prevalence of intrinsic proofs—that is, of “argument generated through the use of rhetoric.”²² This kind of argument can include the use of the aforementioned commonplaces as well as appeals to pathos, or feeling; ethos, or the character of the speaker; and logos, or logic. Skeptics are far more likely to accept logic than they are its sister intrinsic proofs, but it is not as neatly distanced from them as it would first appear.

Skeptics and Arguments from Pathos

Arguments from pathos are uniquely effective, striking straight at the core of why it is people act, and atheists shy away from these arguments no more than any other rhetor would. However much men such as Dawkins and Hitchens may deride arguments from pathos in their appeals to a more rational and reasonable world, their arguments as to the harm done by religion embed impassioned pathetic appeals within their factual shells and provide explosive argumentative content for those who would wish to debate the topic. This does not, by any means, render skeptical argument ineffective; skeptics are as effective at argument as any other group—as the growing ranks of nonbelievers in the United States indicates—and they are not

above employing the tactics that they view as necessary to gain supporters for their cause, in which they passionately believe. However, the continuation of a false dichotomy in which the intrinsic and the extrinsic are viewed as separate and unequal, creates an argumentative ground in which skeptics are incapable of honestly evaluating their argumentative capabilities for what they are.

Extending beyond the need for secularists to make convincing cases, however, is the more important problem that masculinized views of logic and methods assumed to be objective are treated as preferable to the feminized intrinsic and subjective. This preference is particularly damaging when accounting for the problem of harassment in the skeptical movement.

Harassment is, by its very nature, subjective, since it is experienced by an individual or group who must determine its severity and whether it warrants definition as such. Firsthand accounts are the most accessible and common method of reporting marginalization and, if an entire means of expression is rendered invalid by the argumentative preferences of a movement, that movement is inherently rejecting the ability of its members to narrate their own oppression. Atheists are rhetors, whether or not they view themselves as such, and they are arguing a case. Since the purportedly logical form of their arguments has content,²³ they must be mindful of what, precisely, that content is, in order to ensure that they are not unintentionally making a case that is alienating to newcomers, and in this case to women.

False Dichotomies

False dichotomies such as those between men and women as scientists and between intrinsic and extrinsic proofs elide the necessity for collaboration between people and ideas in order to maintain functional institutions. As Cordelia Fine points out in *Delusions of Gender*, which details the multitudes of problems with evolutionary psychology and its attempts to

explain gendered differences between boys and girls, when false dichotomies about male and female brains become the scientific norm, “speculation becomes elevated to the status of fact[...]helping to create the very gender inequalities that the neuroscientific claims seek to explain.”²⁴ In this sort of environment, because there has become one rigid ideal to which science must conform its studies as to how men and women function, it is impossible to achieve gender equality, but that should be the least of concerns for a scientist-qua-scientist. An unwillingness to consider the effects of socialization on the human brain, or even to consider that it may well be impossible to raise a child in enough of a cultural vacuum to conclusively determine where the dividing line is between neurology and socialization, leads to the inability to conduct scientific studies with any measure of accuracy, which should be the basis for evaluation of whether the science in question is valid.

In regards to rhetoric, the false dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic proofs—and in particular that between pathos and logos—which skeptics often tend to invoke, creates a situation in which skeptics are incapable of being effective rhetors because of their inability to objectively observe their appeal to subjectivity as a source of rhetorical appeal. This is dangerous to skepticism as an organized cause because it renders them both as detectably unobjective and, more dangerously, hostile to the narratives of marginalized bodies. These marginalized people, rather than a liability, would be a boon to secularism and, further, may themselves benefit from the movement were it to focus its not-inconsiderable intellectual prowess upon the societal origins of marginalization as a phenomenon. Without this integration of argumentative tactics, however, the movement is left in its current situation: deep rifts have cleft a movement that once appeared unified because a loud portion of its members cannot accept the narratives of the other portion.

The heated debate with the movement did not start with Rebecca Watson, and it certainly has not ended with her. Sagan's maxim, ever at the heart of skepticism as a movement, is writ large over this continuing divide: "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." If this is true, as most skeptics would contend, then the commonplace requires its users to define their terms and skeptically interrogate them. What sorts of claims, from what sorts of bodies, constitute extraordinary claims? What sort of evidence is sufficiently extraordinary to support these claims? Watson, as a woman and, equally importantly, as a leader within secularism, claimed that a man approached her after she had deemed such an approach inappropriate. She did not claim that he overstepped his physical boundaries or that he raped her. She did not use any pejoratives to describe the man in question. She claimed, quite simply, that a man approached her in an inappropriate situation and made an inappropriate request couched in terms commonly understood to imply a request for sexual intercourse.

This situation, one that is so common as to not even warrant a moment's notice, morphed from a quiet, mildly embarrassed request for guys "not to do that" into the battle cry of a crazed misandrist in the hands of her opponents. Due to her positioning as a female body in a male movement, opponents interpreted her statement as extraordinary, saying that she "looks like a train wreck [and] is obviously a hateful lesbian feminazi," she "is clearly a rape fetishist"^{25 26} or she is a "stupid lying whore."²⁷ The vast majority of critiques of Watson do not attempt to use evidence to disprove her claim—after all, as an event that occurs relatively frequently among women, it is not particularly extraordinary. The critiques, rather, serve to remind Watson of her position as a woman in the movement, and to posit that the claim is extraordinary because she is a woman who dared to claim that a man treated her even mildly inappropriately. While the treatment of Watson at the ever-typing hands of her fellow atheists has been horrific enough, it

raises the necessary question of how an even more incriminating claim would be treated within this community.

Skeptics from all levels of the movement have been more than willing to provide the horrifying answer to this question through the firestorm of response a comment by Jen McCreight about the prevalence of harassment at conferences and online. In May of 2012, McCreight—a doctoral student in genome sciences and the author of *Blag Hag*²⁸—implied that leaders, rather than simply average conference attendees, engaged in harassment. She mentioned on a panel at the Women in Secularism conference that “when she started speaking at conferences, multiple people contacted her behind the scenes to tell her which male speakers she should steer clear of.”²⁹ Many commenters suggested that she and others who knew the identities of the offending parties should name and shame those parties, forgetting that such a suggestion is implausible in the shadow of Elevatorgate. The hesitation of skeptics to accept claims that have no physical evidence renders this request suspicious on its face: if so many skeptics are unwilling to accept Watson’s claim, there is no reason that they would be more willing to accept outright accusations against leaders in the movement.

The reception of McCreight’s statement generated precisely the hyperskepticism as that of Watson’s request. DJ Grothe, as the president of the James Randi Educational Foundation, has a rather significant stake in ensuring that the JREF’s annual convention—The Amazing Meeting, or TAM—is and is perceived to be a welcoming place for women. However, rather than taking seriously the concerns that McCreight had brought up, he referred to the quiet pipeline of women’s information as “rumor and distasteful locker room banter...especially when it is from just one or a few women recounting sexual exploits they’ve had with speakers who are eventually deemed as ‘skeezy.’”³⁰ In short, Grothe asserted that women wanted it at night and

regretted it in the morning, a rather common claim of those who would discount rape charges and, as he was addressing, harassment claims.

Conclusions

Many atheists work tirelessly to counterbalance the sexism that is pouring forth from anonymous internet commenters and leaders of the movement alike. The problem of misogyny in the movement certainly does not go without challenge from many bloggers and speakers who operate from within. While the work of allies—many of whom are targets of online harassment themselves—is greatly appreciated, it takes away time that they could spend writing about scientific skepticism and the topics that interest them, assuming that their skepticism is not primarily focused upon social issues. Jen McCreight, who briefly stopped blogging after an onslaught of sexually graphic comments purporting to be from her, still sporadically writes, saying that

I'll still keep writing and speaking about science and skepticism because, well, I find them important and interesting...[but] I don't have time to create unique material about science and skepticism when I'm stuck meta-blogging about how some atheist yet again told me to go kill myself on twitter because I'm an ugly bitch who's ruining skepticism.

Her decision, ultimately, has been to blog exclusively about science and the topics that interest her, and to ignore the sexism endemic to her chosen arena of expression excepting when that sexism has larger implications.³¹ Watson herself continues to blog and to produce her podcast because, despite the near-constant barrage of abuse that she receives via Twitter, email, and comments, she refuses to stop. “There have been many times in the past year that I've considered stepping down, too...I'm not entirely sure why I don't, but I think it's some combination of obstinance (sic) and a genuine belief that if one person can make a difference then that one

person should make a difference.”³² Rebecca Watson believes that skepticism will make the world better, so she works to make the world a more skeptical place, no matter how many of her fellow skeptics think that it is not her place to do so.

Regardless of whether religious belief is declining and atheism and scientific skepticism are growing as rapidly as the skeptical movement would like, the movement is still meeting with some measure of success as the world slowly grows more disinclined to provide supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. If secularists intend to be a powerful force for good in the world, then it is incumbent upon them to consider what, precisely, they are working for, and what their behavior within the movement projects to those who may be interested. It is true that skepticism functions within a larger patriarchal society, that religion frequently reinforces patriarchal norms because of its own power structures, and that skepticism is far from unique on the count of having problems with the inclusion of women's voices. However, should organized skepticism wish to project itself as having a more moral perspective on the world than that of religion, it is necessary for skeptics to demonstrate precisely how their worldview is different from those of the religions that they would wish to claim adherents from.

A skeptical movement composed largely of white men with the economic means to afford a formal education will certainly be successful in the pursuit of white men so long as it provides power structures that elevate them, but there is a great deal more to the world than white men. Rather than limiting itself to an arbitrary ceiling of white male membership, a movement that applies skepticism to the larger structures that uphold patriarchy in the entirety of society, regardless of its religious orientation, will be much more successful at attracting women. If religion is by necessity misogynist—a claim that does not necessarily prove true in the face of progressive religious denominations—then atheists must prove themselves that much more

progressive than both their conservative religious and progressive religious competitors if they wish to give potential deconverts more reason to join than simply that of knowing what they claim to be the truth. People will be, after all, wont to ask: what good is the truth if it does not set them free?

Endnotes

¹ Rebecca Watson, "About Mythbusters, Robot Eyes, Feminism, and Jokes," *Skepchick* (blog), June 20, 2011, <http://skepchick.org/2011/06/about-mythbusters-robot-eyes-feminism-and-jokes>.

² Jen McCreight, "Richard Dawkins, your privilege is showing," *Blaghag* (blog), July 2, 2011, <http://www.blaghag.com/2011/07/richard-dawkins-your-privilege-is.html>.

³ Jeff Wagg, "Are Atheists Delusional? Thoughts on Skepticon3," *Indieskeptics* (Blog), November 16, 2010, <http://indieskeptics.com/2010/11/16/are-atheists-delusional-thoughts-on-skepticon3>.

⁴ PZ Myers, "A Reply to Steven Novella," *Pharyngula* (blog), January 30, 2013, <http://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2013/01/30/a-reply-to-steven-novella>.

⁵ Jesse M. Smith, "Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism," *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2011): 216.

⁶ Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 2 (2006): 213, 227.

⁷ Smith, "Becoming an Atheist in America," 232.

⁸ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 10.

⁹ Sharon Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 64-65.

¹⁰ Smith, "Becoming an Atheist in America," 234.

¹¹ Ruth H. Bloch, "The Origins of Feminism and the Limits of Enlightenment," *Modern Intellectual History* 3, no. 3 (2006): 488.

¹² Ariela Keysar, "Who Are America's Atheists and Agnostics?," in *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*, ed. Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (Hartford: Trinity College Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2007): 35.

¹³ "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five-Adults Have No Religions Affiliation," *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

¹⁴ Atheist Census.

¹⁵ "Women's Experiences in Secular Groups Can be Uniquely Divergent from Men's," *Secular Census*, January 23, 2013, <http://secularcensus.us/analysis/2013-01-23>.

¹⁶ "Best Sellers in Atheism," Amazon, March 17, 2013, http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/12764/ref=pd_zg_hrsr_b_1_4_last.

¹⁷ Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair*, (January 2007): <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>.

¹⁸ Lawrence H. Summers, "Remarks at NBER Conference on Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce," *Harvard University*, January 14, 2005, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080130023006/http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2005/nber.html>.

¹⁹ Victoria L. Brescoll, John F. Dovidio, Mark J. Graham, Jo Handelsman, and Corinne A. Moss-Racusin, "Science Faculty's Subtle Gender Biases Favor Male Students," *PNAS* 109, no. 41 (2012): 16474.

²⁰ Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, 5th ed. (United States: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008), 267.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950), 57-59.

²⁴ Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 186.

²⁵ Page o' Hate, *Skepchick* (blog), <http://skepchick.org/page-o-hate/>.

²⁶ These are two of a litany of comments that have been documented on the Page o' Hate; Watson has carefully documented much of the abuse she's received so as to provide the sort of evidence that her critics demand.

²⁷ Paul Elam, "Rebecca Watson, hero and mathematician," *A Voice For Men*, (September 8, 2012): <http://www.avoiceformen.com/feminism/rebecca-watson-hero-and-mathematician>.

²⁸ Jen McCreight, "About Jen," *BlagHag* (blog), <http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag/about-jen>.

²⁹ Stephanie Zvan, "Zero Intolerance," *Almost Diamonds* (blog), May 20, 2012, <http://freethoughtblogs.com/almostdiamonds/2012/05/20/zero-intolerance>.

³⁰ D.J. Grothe, May 30, 2012 (6:50 PM), comment on Stephanie Zvan, "Where Are The Women?" *Freethought Blogs*, May 30, 2012,

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/almostdiamonds/2012/05/30/where-are-the-women/#comment-84813>.

³¹ Jen McCreight, "My Current Feelings on the Skeptical Movement and Blogging," *Blaghag* (blog), January 31, 2013, <http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag/2013/01/my-current-feelings-on-the-skeptical-movement-and-blogging>.

³² Rebecca Watson, "Misandry: A How-To," *Skepchick*, September 6, 2012, <http://skepchick.org/2012/09/misandry-a-how-to/>.

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