

## ARE UNIVERSES THICKER THAN BLACKBERRIES?

Martin Gardner  
W.W. Norton, 287 pages, \$25.95  
review James Franklin  
in [The New Criterion](#)

“When I was a freshman at the University of Chicago in 1932,” Martin Gardner writes in *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?*, “I intended to become a physicist. For better or worse, I got sidetracked into philosophy.” He soon became a writer instead, but his seventy or so books have all been informed by the sound understanding of science, mathematics, and philosophy that one could acquire at a good university in that distant era. Those disciplines have given him a firm footing for the center of his life’s work, the exposure of fraud in charlatans pretending to be spiritualists, religious freaks posing as scientists, and scientists thinking they are philosophers.

The title essay in this, his most recent collection of occasional pieces, deals with an example of the last of these types. The philosopher C. S. Peirce once said that unfortunately universes are not as plentiful as blackberries. He spoke in an age when that was an urbane expression of a platitude, but physics and philosophy have passed through the Jazz Age since then, acquiring thought-forms that bring to mind the philosophers’ joke: “What others took to be a *reductio* he embraced as a corollary.”

Gardner observes that

“One of the most astonishing recent trends in science is that many top physicists and cosmologists now defend the wild notion that not only are universes as common as blackberries, but even more common,” because the universe splits at every moment into all the futures that are possible under the laws of quantum mechanics. Gardner goes straight to the point: the scientists who say this have given no reason for believing that the possible worlds other than this one, useful though they may be as fictions, have real existence.

Physicists who cannot tell the difference between fiction and reality are among those fraudsters who have deceived themselves as comprehensively as they have misled the public. Many of Gardner’s targets are not so innocent on that score. Several of his chapters examine mediums and performers who have claimed such powers as sight through blindfolds. They knew they were tricking the public, and the only mystery about them is why they bothered to waste their lives doing so. Much more dangerous have been some of the gurus who probably did convince themselves, but only because they refused to ask if the source of their growing power over their school of disciples and victims was really

founded on any good evidence. Among the worst cases in Gardner’s gallery of monsters is Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, who caused untold distress to mothers of autistic children by telling

them they were to blame for the condition. The evidence for this theory amounted to what it usually does in these cases, zero.

There are certain issues on which Gardner is arguably not quite rationalist enough. After war service he returned to the University of Chicago and studied with Rudolf Carnap, spending many happy hours editing Carnap's lectures into a book (*Philosophical Foundations of Physics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, 1966). He accepts Carnap's now rather unfashionable view that the key question in the rationality of science is the justification of inductive inference—inference from the observed to the unobserved (for example, from the past to the future, from a sample to the population as a whole). Carnap's plan was to show that such inferences, though never absolutely certain, were justified as a matter of logic. Gardner does not agree with that, on the grounds that induction does not work in all possible worlds (as it should if it is a matter of logic). He states confidently that "induction works only on universes that are uniformly patterned." He does not offer any universe which is not uniformly patterned and on which induction does not work. (Obviously, it is no use taking a chaotic universe, since there the only induction would be: "The observed is chaotic, so the unobserved is chaotic," and indeed it is.) This is surprising, since Gardner is possibly the world's expert on patterns-in-general, as evidenced by his many popular writings on mathematical structures (represented in this book by an entertaining piece on magic hexagrams). Surely we should demand of him what he would demand of a swami who claimed to be able to levitate—"Don't tell us, show us."

Is the same failure to go the last mile with reason evident also in Gardner's views on religion? His skeptical friends in the fight against pseudoscience, parapsychology, and spiritualism have often been distressed to find that he is a religious believer, of a sort. Not that he suspends his skepticism in dealing with religious matters. On the contrary, small sects with complicated revelations are well-represented among his targets. If there is one essay in *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?* that does tire the reader, it is his extended account of the details of Oahspe, a book dictated from on high to John Ballou Newbrough via automatic typewriting in 1881. One can take only so much of "Closest to Jehovih are his countless Sons. The Sons have such names as Sethantes, Ah'shong, Aph, Sue, Apollo, ... Yima, Lika, Uz and Fragapatti. The goddesses ..." The point of this, Gardner's thinks, is that the more details supplied, the more farcical the religion looks. He is firmly convinced that the deity, though he exists, is not the kind of being to write books.

Naturally, in view of his skepticism about every particular sect, we are interested to know the positive content of Gardner's own faith. The present book merely informs us that "he calls himself a philosophical theist in the tradition of Plato, Kant, Pierre Bayle, Charles Peirce, William James, and Miguel de Unamuno." That merely whets our appetite further, as the intersection of the views of those luminaries surely achieves the theological equivalent of a true white square minimalism. Gardner satisfied everyone's curiosity in detail twenty years ago in his most ambitious book, *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* (1983). Many an eighteen-year-old, suddenly discovering the vast world of disputed philosophical questions, has no doubt planned to write one day a substantial book after reaching a view on all of them. *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* actually accomplishes this project, and, as a clear account of "all the big questions," with a distinctive point of view, it is among the best on the market. The first chapter is "Why I am not a solipsist"—a good place to start—and later chapters include "Why I am not an ethical relativist," "Why I am not a Marxist," and so on. On religion, he argues firstly that none of the arguments for the existence of God are of value (he answers one of the design arguments by supposing that, "for all we know," our apparently designed universe may be one of billions; either he means that universes may propagate like blackberries when needed to camouflage traces of the divine, or he has changed his view on this question.) He argues also that the reasons against belief in God are not convincing; he returns to this in *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?* with a fascinating interpretation of G. K.

Chesterton's story *The Man Who Was Thursday* as an answer to the problem of evil. He admits that the balance of reasons is somewhat against belief in God. Then, he says, he believes in God anyway, purely because he wants to believe in a God who will grant immortality. Gardner has not invested faith in anything definitively ruled out by the evidence. Nevertheless, there is something faintly shocking in the leader of the world's skeptics in the struggle against quackery admitting to belief in something against the balance of reasons, simply through an act of will.

*Much of Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?* addresses less serious questions. There are enthusiastic accounts of some old and neglected pieces of popular literature such as Edgar Wallace's *The Green Archer* and a clear non-technical explanation (which first appeared in *The New Criterion* in December 2000) of the point of Gödel's famous results in logic. As always, there is reference to many books that one may have missed, such as Harper's *Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (from which it appears that success in the spiritualist trade may come at the cost of a lot of headaches) and *Rustlings in the Golden City: Being a Record of Spiritualistic Experiences in Ballarat and Melbourne* (London: Office of Light, 1902). Gardner's efforts against gullibility have not been in vain, and there is a sense that the miscreants are on the run. And there is hope for the future. Gardner reports on a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* from 1998 that describes the experiment devised by Emily Rosa to test the claims of Therapeutic Touch. Practitioners of this "art" claimed to be able to feel a tingling caused by the "energy field" surrounding a person's body when they put their hands near (not on) the body. The test had the practitioners put their hand through an opaque screen, with a coin toss selecting whether the hand of another person (invisible to them) was or was not put near theirs. Could they tell when there was a hand there? They could not. Miss Rosa was aged nine.

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