The Magic of Illusion-free Thought

Grounds for awarding the Erwin Fischer Prize to James Randi

Dear James Randi Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my position as a member of the scientific council of the International League of Freethinkers and Atheists (IBKA) I am very pleased today to be allowed to give the reasons for awarding the Erwin Fischer Prize 2004. The IBKA presents this prize in memory of Erwin Fischer, a conspicuous defender of philosophical civil rights every second year to people or institutions that have performed a special service in at least one of the following areas:

- 1. the extension or preservation of freedom of creed,
- 2. the separation of church and state,
- 3. critical enlightenment concerning religion and
- 4. the final criterion is especially important for tonight's award the advancement of clear thinking.

Following Ursula and Johannes Neumann, Karlheinz Deschner and Taslima Nasrin, the American magician and investigator James "The Amazing" Randi is to be honoured with the Erwin Fischer Prize – a man who has carried into the world the "idea of critical reason" in an unusual and impressive manner.

I admit: just on thirty years ago when I heard the name "Randi" for the first time the thought would never have occurred to me in the least to connect this person *in any way* with "reason". Well, I was an eight-year old boy who probably wouldn't have been able to understand what the "idea of critical reason" was in any case. However: had I been able to, the name "Randi" still wouldn't have passed my lips in this respect. I was sitting as if paralysed in front of the television which was showing our laureate hanging about 30 meters over the Niagara Falls, head down, tied up in a strait-jacket, hands and feet bound. Certainly every last detail of this breathtaking stunt had been rationally pored over, but I was also certain that Immanuel Kant, when he formulated his motto of enlightenment, "Have courage to make use of your own reason", never had in mind such a daring feat of escape over the Niagara Falls!

But, however, Randi's particular contribution to the enlightenment project is only conceivable against the background of his extraordinarily successful career as a professional magician and escape artist. Whereas "normal scientists" can be fooled extremely easily by apparently paranormally gifted tricksters, Randi's trained eye was and is immune against such deceptive moves. Of course, he knows the moves, he has the tricks under control which mislead an audience. Randi's ground-breaking success as the "Houdini of skeptical thinking" is in no way surprising, since nobody may better debunk the prophets of superstition than a magician, nobody may better

refute the paranormal illusions of normal people than a professional illusionist. If James Randi didn't exist, ladies and gentlemen, he would have to be invented...

In the course of his years long work as an investigator Randi has been successful in demonstrating the quackery of many a so-called "faith healer", "wizard" or "pseudoscientist". Among the victims of his unrelenting search for truth are – among others – "miraculous spoon bender" Uri Geller (who despite all proofs to the contrary has been experiencing a comeback in Germany in the last year) as well as the famous Christian faith healer and televangelist Peter Popoff. Randi's urge to discover has not only been fuelled by those such as Geller, Popoff or even Philippine psychic surgeons who claim to have paranormal abilities, he was and always is at the vanguard when apparently respectable scientists publish research results that stand in flagrant contradiction to accepted naturalistic models of interpretation.

Randi founded in 1996 the James Randi Educational Foundation which pursues the aim of supporting critical thinking in general and in particular of supporting the debunking of pseudo-science and apparently psychic phenomena. Special attention has been paid to the so-called "million dollar challenge". The foundation offers a prize of \$1 million to anyone who succeeds in demonstrating a supernatural, psychic or paranormal ability under agreed scientific test conditions agreed prior to the test.

Honoured ladies and gentlemen, in case anyone is seriously interested in getting his or her hands on the million: In order to cash in on the award it isn't even necessary to have a command of such exotic abilities of communicating with the dead (for instance by using a modified hearing aid), it would suffice if you were to succeed in distinguishing the homeopathic preparations Belladonna and Chamomilla from one another at their apparently highly concentrated "potentiation" D30. That sounds easier than it is because at a dilution of 10³⁰ chemistry claims that there is no molecule of the original substance left in solution. It's got Belladonna D30 on it but there's certainly no Belladonna in it. Ask your doctor or chemist! (And if he tells you something else it is perhaps time to consider a change...)

It comes as no surprise that up to now not one of the hopeful prize applicants has come even close to the million, they have all failed even preliminary testing. Of course this does not at all prove that paranormal phenomena do not exist (and Randi has never claimed anything of the sort!) beyond doubt, however, is that the foundation has made an excellent contribution with its media-effective million dollar challenge to making it more difficult today for harbingers of paranormal phenomena to sell their unproven wares.

In spite of this success there has been even among skeptics sporadic criticism of the foundation's activities. For example Stephan Matthiesen opined in the German "Skeptiker" that the foundation's "enormous financial means" would be put to better use because the million dollar project was highly doubtful. I won't enter into a discussion of the misunderstandings this article has spawned and that have been put into the right light by Randi himself on his web site, but rather I would like to give my

reasons for thinking that there can be no better use for the million dollars than the one Randi has put them to.

Let us consider which possible scenarios are connected with the challenge: The *first* scenario is probably the most likely: Even in the future it will not be possible for someone to succeed in demonstrating paranormal phenomena under scientific testing conditions. In which case the foundation keeps its million dollars, is able to increase it with interest whereas at the same time pressure on the esoteric and pseudo-scientific scene increases from year to year as the prize remains unclaimed. In the end the paranormalists have to live with the burden of being unable or not wanting to prove their claims even only partially.

The second scenario is less likely but it nevertheless cannot be dismissed: It might be possible for a particularly able trickster to succeed in hoodwinking the experts of the Randi Foundation. This would almost certainly be the worst case: the million would be gone without a paranormal phenomenon having been proven. Even if the risk of this happening is small the possibility of it happening in principle shows that it not only represents a challenge to pseudo-scientific thought but to skeptical thought as well. The skeptics always have to remain one step ahead of even the most hardened tricksters. Thus the challenge contributes to sharpening skeptical thought. If at any time the million were to be lost to a talented trickster it would be learning the hard way but after that no skeptic anywhere in the world would sit still until the trick had been debunked – with the result that similar deceptions would be less likely to succeed in the future.

The *third scenario* is as similarly improbable as the second but in contrast to the second it would be unwise to speak of "failure": In principle it might be the case that someone does indeed succeed in documenting a phenomenon that today we would call "paranormal" because it contradicts our hitherto scientific patterns of explanation. In this case the offer of the prize money would be worth it *because in the end the knowledge won in the process of failing to be able to disprove a particular phenomenon would contribute to correction and extension of our existing scientific view of the world.*

This last scenario showing that the James Randi Educational Foundation is able to embrace even failure as success documents very well the difference between skeptical and religious thinking or: between Knowledge and Belief to bring into play the title of our congress. It is the aim of all science resting as is known on a methodology of doubt to acquire new knowledge – and not to defend old dogmata. If there were really good empirical reasons telling against the materialistic, naturalistic paradigm then it would be a matter of course to have to reject this explanatory pattern which has been so successful up to now.

The search for scientific knowledge is, as one can see from this and as James Randi has repeatedly emphasised, by definition *open-ended*. It would, however, be a grave mistake to mistake this *open-endedness* in principle with any form of *arbitrariness*.

For as long as no better explanatory possibilities are at our disposal, every scientist is obliged to vigorously defend the exiting scientific explanatory pattern against irrationality.

James Randi has done exactly this in a conspicuous fashion time and time again. The argumentative keenness that comes to light in his many books, articles, interviews and commentaries is not an expression of dogmatic narrow-mindedness but rather is consistent with the basic (though often neglected) demand on serious science, to lay your cards on the table, not to hide oneself behind so-called "scientific caution", but to defend with vigour explanations currently securely held to be valid until they can be replaced by better, more successful hypotheses.

There would be much more to say about Randi's merits as investigator, skeptic and scientist but I would like to leave these topics for now and, instead, illuminate one aspect that is of special importance for the IBKA (but also for the co-organiser of this conference, the *Giordano Bruno Foundation*): James Randi belongs together with Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Michael Shermer to the prominent initiators of the so-called "brights", an international decidedly naturalistic intellectual movement.

The artificial noun "brights" means something like the "awakened", "enlightened" "smart" or "clever". As supporters of a scientific world view the brights have thrown down the gauntlet to the manifold forms of pseudo-science and religious bigotry. And there is much to do in this area - particularly in the USA where thoroughgoing naturalistically thinking people take up leading positions in science (and thus play a significant social and economical role in the country!) but at the same time are looked down upon as a minority in society. At the current time a majority of Americans (in spite of their existing prejudices) would rather elect someone as President who was black, homosexual, female or a Mormon rather than an atheist candidate.

The "brights" would like to turn the trend around in this matter and rely on the experiences made by the gay rights movement. Whereas in 1978 only 26% of Americans were able to imagine voting for a homosexual President, in 1999 59% were. Partly responsible for this success was the politics of word choice in the homosexual movement taking over the word "gay" that has in the meantime almost completely lost its original meaning of "cheerful". In a similar way Randi, Dawkins and co want to work with the word "brights". It may sound utopian to believe that in a not too distant future perhaps that a "bright", a "smart", "clever" or "enlightened" person might even become President of the USA, but it cannot be denied that in the short period of their existence the "brights" have already been able to celebrate considerable success: On the one hand a worldwide network of thinkers imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment has come into being, on the other the media have been unable to avoid making more of a topic out of subjects that were glossed over up to now such as the incompatibility of naturalistic knowledge and supernatural belief.

As the example of the "brights" shows Randi has not faltered even in his eighth decade to carry the torch of enlightenment courageously into society. Of course his

uncompromising stance has not always earned him friends. He has had to endure a number of court cases that have cost him a lot of time and money. Randi's stamina has always paid off. Among other awards Randi has received the *Blackstone Cup*, the Prize of the *Betty and David Koetser Foundation for Brain Research* in Zurich, the *Golden Medal* of the University of Ghent, an honorary doctorate of the University of Indianapolis, the *Forum Award* of the *American Physical Society* as well as the *Humanist Award* of the *American Humanist Society*. Apart from these awards Randi was made a "*Genius Fellow*" of the renowned *John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation*, an honour associated with prize money of \$272,000. Even an asteroid which crosses the orbit of Mars has been named after him: *Asteroid 3163 Randi*.

This impressive but by no means complete list of the awards Randi has received is to be extended today by a further one, the Erwin Fischer Prize of the IBKA. James Randi receives this award for his conspicuous accomplishments in the advancement of critical thinking. I am certain that in this category we could not have found a better, more deserving laureate in all the world! Inasmuch we face today – as we have in awarding previous *Erwin Fischer Prizes* – a rather paradoxical situation: Awarding the prize seems to honour the award-giving organisation, the IBKA more than the person meant to be honoured by receiving the award!

Dear James Randi, the IBKA is honoured that you have undertaken to come to us in Cologne to receive the *Erwin Fischer Prize*. Unfortunately we do not have at our disposal the financial resources of the Nobel Prize committee that is able to have recourse to the dubious though substantial fortune of an explosives and weapon producer. But perhaps this conference and prize ceremony will contribute somewhat towards a stronger perception of your important commitment to the "Project of Enlightenment" also in Germany. Should this be the case as we all hope your journey to "old Europe" will have been well worth it.

I wish you — along with the rest of us — that you will be able to continue your successful work for a long time to come and be able to spread further the "magic of illusion-free thought". So that the "warriors of god" and those "gently going stupid" do not have the last say one needs not only a incisive intellect but also the able to stand upright. You have shown you have both to a special degree making you an example for the enlightened in the whole world. It is therefore a great honour for me in the name of the IBKA to congratulate you on receiving the *Erwin Fischer Prize 2004*.

Translation: Lee Traynor