

BaMBoozle

Derren Brown - Tricks of the Mind

Chris Knight

Tricks of the Mind

Derren Brown
Transworld, 2007

Disillusionment

"The Bible is not history."

Thus reads the opening sentence of Part One of Derren Brown's *Tricks of the Mind*. It's the only reason I bought the book. Why is such an apparently irrelevant statement used to begin a book on magic and illusion? I wanted to see why he thought it appropriate and whether he would provide any evidence for his claim.

Part One of the book is called 'Disillusionment' and the opening words thus capture what appears to have been a major disillusionment in Derren Brown's life – the loss of his teenage Christian faith. Not that he appeared to be particularly sad at the actual loss of his faith, but it was the beginning of a process of scepticism about many different beliefs. Having developed an interest in psychic and spiritualist claims, his investigations convinced him that these beliefs were based on circular reasoning and a selectivity in what evidence one is prepared to consider. Thus he started to fear that his own belief in Christianity had a similar origin and was, likewise, false. Was there actually any more evidence for Christianity than for the other beliefs that he was starting to challenge?

Tricks of the Mind

Derren Brown is well known for his various

television programmes,[1] and most famously perhaps for the routine where he played Russian Roulette with a gun apparently loaded with one live bullet. Described as a 'magician, psychological illusionist, mentalist and sceptic of paranormal phenomena',[2] Brown appears able to predict future events and read minds with uncanny accuracy, whilst also being able to manipulate individuals to do his bidding, through direct hypnotism or imperceptible suggestion.

Tricks of the Mind is a semi-autobiographical book, claiming to reveal some of the secrets behind his performances. The loose theme to the book, Brown claims, is 'a love of the tricks our mind can play with us' (page 354)[3]. If you have been amazed at some of the feats that Brown has achieved in his television shows and wondered just how he achieves them, this book is for you. It won't reveal many new 'secrets', because as he makes clear, most of the techniques that he uses are as old as history, but the book does give some fascinating insights into the way that our minds work as well as how they can sometimes play tricks on us. If you want an introduction to the psychology behind conjuring tricks (Part Two), astounding feats of memory (Part Three), hypnosis and suggestion (Part Four) and how to tell when people are lying to you (Part Five), then that is what you will get, in the midst of much teenage humour and self-deprecating aggrandisement. Yet along with all of this, Brown brings some more serious discussion of what he describes as 'uninformed strong opinions' – including, of course, religious beliefs, which he places in the same category as belief in alternative medicines, psychic phenomena and spiritualism. His discussion and dismissal of religious beliefs is not at all surprising, given that Brown describes Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* as 'my favourite book of all time'.[4]

'The Bible is not history'

Having been suitably astonished at the couple of Brown's programmes that I had seen, for whatever else they may be they form excellent 'entertainment', I skimmed through *Tricks of the Mind* in a bookshop, coming across the opening gambit that I have already mentioned: 'The Bible is not history'.

Brown provides a fair amount of personal

background that explains his interest in, and ultimate dismissal of, Christianity. He describes himself in his late teens as 'a *bouncing, clapping awfulness*' of a Christian, trying to convert anyone who would listen. This was '*the unpleasant result of a childhood indoctrination followed by years of circular belief to support it*' (page 8). Brown therefore describes having to come to terms with the '*fact*' that the Bible is not history as '*fiddly*'. He claims that Christians are '*never encouraged to really study the facts and challenge [their] own beliefs*'. He continues: '*I always imagined that challenging my own beliefs might make them stronger*' (page 7).

Brown tells how his Christian belief was challenged, and eventually destroyed, by the fear that his belief was a '*clearly circular belief system*' (page 11). He defines what he means (pages 11-12):

Essentially, one believes X so strongly that all evidence that does not support X is ignored, and all events that fit in with X are noticed and amplified.

He illustrates this by the example of a friend who worked as a psychic healer, whom Brown realised unwittingly filtered the facts in order to confirm her own abilities (page 12). Fearful that his own Christian faith was similarly unknowingly hypocritical, he considered the '*outside evidence*' (page 13). Brown rightly realised that (page 14):

it all rested on whether or not Christ really came back from really being dead. If he was actually resurrected as it says in the Bible, then it's all true, regardless of what one thinks of Christians and their behaviour. If he didn't, then it's all nonsense, and Christianity is a delusion.

I don't suppose that St Paul will sue over this minor piece of plagiarism (1 Corinthians 15:13-19), and he would certainly agree with Brown's acknowledgement in the following paragraph that Christians '*do appear to tackle this head on*' by arguing for the resurrection as the best overall explanation of the Gospel accounts. Brown displays an unacknowledged contradiction here, of course. If Christians provide these sorts of argument, then contrary to his claims, Christian belief is neither '*blind*' nor '*unquestioned*' and '*rational discussion*' has not stopped (page 13).

Leaving aside this ambiguity, if Brown is so familiar with the Christian arguments for the resurrection, we need to ask why he does not believe them. The reason, he tells us, is that these arguments are based on the misapprehension which he counters as he begins his book: '*The Bible is not history.*' In discussing Christian arguments for the resurrection, Brown explains that (page 14):

There are plenty of arguments like this, but all are based on the notion that we can take the New Testament stories as accounts of real events. But to decide that the Bible is history, one must ignore the vast amount of impartial biblical research that shows it really isn't – in other words to decide that one's personal conviction means more than clear evidence.

He continues by urging that (page 15):

only evidence must be of interest. And the evidence shows very clearly that the stories of the New Testament were written in the first couple of hundred years after the historical Jesus died. These stories then continued to be edited and revised for political and social needs for most of the first millennium.... Although the Gospels are attributed to individuals, they were written largely by communities. Great and powerful stories were told, changed and rearranged over several generations.

So once Brown realised '*that the accounts of Jesus were just tales*' (page 15), he could no longer accept the resurrection, based, as it was, on those very documents that he now doubted. In his main text, Brown fails to reference what gave rise to his beliefs in the historical inaccuracy and late authorship of the Bible, and he quotes only fairly general examples. However, the book that he claims to have started '*as a half-believer*' and finished '*with my belief in tatters*' is included in his suggestions for further reading (page 380).

The evidence that Derren Brown ignores

Brown acknowledges that his own presuppositions can dispose him to reject any arguments for religious faith. He writes (page 279):

To look at things objectively and step outside of

our beliefs can be almost impossible. For any of us, that is, not just believers in the paranormal.

He also acknowledges that he had (page 15):

a personal desire to back up my disbelief in the way I expected I should be able to back up my belief when I had it.

In other words, he wanted to apply the same standards to his atheistic beliefs as he did to his earlier religious beliefs. The question, then, is how anyone ever changes their mind on anything? How can we achieve the 'almost impossible' and decide that our beliefs are false and need to be changed?

Let us first consider how Brown might have lost his Christian faith. He admits that: "*I had not been to church with any regularity for a couple of years, but was still a believer*" (page 10). With little regular spiritual input, it appears that his faith grew weak – or perhaps it might be more true to say that his faith was flagging (for whatever reason) and so he no longer sought spiritual input, or saw it as desirable. There can be many reasons for faith to die. One is that the lifestyle demanded by its moral values is incompatible with the lifestyle the person wants to adopt. Aldous Huxley admits that his main reason for denying any meaning to life was to be freed from certain moral values:

I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption.... For myself as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation ... liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.[5]

It is interesting to see Huxley acknowledging that he was able '*without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons*' for rejecting the moral system to which he objected.

Another reason that faith can die is that it was never firmly based on a solid foundation in the first place. Jesus' parable of the houses built on the rock and on the sand comes to mind (see

Matthew 7:24-29). When good reasons have been thought through for why particular beliefs are true (whether those beliefs are religious or not), those beliefs are far more likely to hold firm even when emotions challenge them.[6] Furthermore, when counter-claims come forward, the balance of evidence can be better evaluated if the supporting evidence has previously been considered. For a considered faith, such challenges are less likely to produce a knee-jerk reaction which either puts up the barriers in order desperately to cling onto a blind faith or, conversely, rejects one's previous beliefs as false without appropriate further consideration. The writer of Proverbs puts it well: '*The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him*'. [7] Beliefs, especially those as important as religious beliefs, should be adopted with a knowledge of the evidence for and against. It is dangerous to accept a view based only on the evidence put forward by its strongest advocates. A reasonable belief comes about by understanding the strongest arguments for and against and assessing that evidence to come to a conclusion.

There is nothing in *Tricks of the Mind* to indicate that Derren Brown's religious beliefs had been formed from a rational examination of the evidence. Indeed, from his own description of those beliefs as based on '*indoctrination*' and '*circular evidence*' (page 8), it would appear that his religious belief was much more of a '*blind faith*'. So with (perhaps) a blind faith, whilst at university Brown became increasingly obsessed with hypnosis and the fraudulent world of psychics and spiritualists (pages 10-11). Intellectual integrity led from questioning of the charlatans to questioning of his own beliefs. Rightly, this led him to examine the evidence for the resurrection – and hence the reliability of the New Testament documents which relate this.

As we have seen, Brown is clearly aware of some of the arguments for the truth of the resurrection, but rejects them on the basis that the New Testament documents are unreliable as historical documents. Brown describes his own approach:

... to avoid my self-directed charge of hypocrisy, I thought I would look at the outside evidence. It's actually rather straightforward to do this with Christianity, although the believer is not usually

encouraged to do so by his peers or pastors.

What he appears to mean by '*the outside evidence*' is arguments that are presented against the reliability of the Gospels and the New Testament documents generally. That is fair enough, but as he acknowledges himself, he has only '*a layman's interest in this sort of scholarship*' (page 15). As a layman interested in forming an opinion on any topic, it is necessary to examine both sides of the argument. I am a scientist and therefore have only a '*layman's interest*' in English Literature. Therefore on hearing that some people believe that Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays, I would not want to come to a decision on this matter by relying *exclusively* on books that argued *for* Bacon's authorship – I would expect those books to present the arguments for this as powerfully as they could. But before coming to a decision on the matter, and if this was an important issue for me, I would want to read a number of books on *both* sides of the argument or at least talk to people with differing beliefs on the topic, preferably those who were passionate about their belief (and so had studied the topic deeply), but who were also rational and evidence-based.

It would be interesting to know whether Derren Brown really had considered the best of the arguments *for* the reliability and historicity of the New Testament documents,[8] as well as those *against*.[9] If so, it is difficult to see how he could possibly state what he does about the contents of the New Testament. Brown asserts that these stories:

... were written in the first couple of hundred years after the historical Jesus died. These stories then continued to be edited and revised for political and social needs for most of the first millennium. (page 15)

This view appears to be based on the assertions of liberal critics of the Bible from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which continue (in modified form) in some contemporary academics.[10]

Brown's view ignores the early and manifold manuscript evidence for the New Testament documents:[11]

§ John Rylands Papyrus 457 contains 5 verses

from the Gospel of John chapter 18 and is dated at about AD 125;

§ More than 30 papyri from the late 2nd to early 3rd centuries contain large sections of entire books;

§ Two papyri from the late 2nd to early 3rd centuries contain most of the Gospels and Acts and the letters of Paul;

§ Four nearly complete copies of the New Testament date from the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

Of course one of the reasons that we find so few manuscripts dated even earlier than this is that the papyri on which they were written were fragile and wore out through continued reading. No doubt that is part of the reason that so many copies were made – but fortunately many early Christian writers also quoted the New Testament documents and copies of *their* writings also exist, providing further early evidence for the reliability of the New Testament writings.

These few examples show that Brown's claims are simply false. To be sure, there are textual variants among the New Testament documents – with so many copies this is inevitable – but there is absolutely no warrant for the assertion that the accounts of Jesus were written over a period of two hundred years and even less that over the next nine hundred years or so they '*continued to be edited and revised for political and social needs*', as Brown claims. This simply ignores the factual, documentary evidence that exists in black and white!

In addition, other historical evidence bears on the historicity of the contents, consistently bearing out the New Testament writings as being accurate and truthful. Professor Craig A. Evans seeks to debunk various claims about Jesus in his book *Fabricating Jesus*. He writes: '*... claims that the Gospels are unreliable, full of myth and legend, and so biased that knowledge of what Jesus really said and did cannot be recovered are excessive and unwarranted*'.^[12] He points out that it is unlikely that the early church invented stories about Jesus to meet their political and social needs (contrary to what Derren Brown claims) because '*many of these questions and issues ... are nowhere addressed by the sayings of Jesus*'.^[13] He also points out that '*the New Testament writings do not hesitate to air the church's dirty linen*',^[14] which is remarkable if

these documents were being refined over several hundred years. His conclusion is that:

The true story of the historical Jesus is exciting and inspiring. The true story may well be an old story, but it is far more compelling than the newer, radical, minimalist, revisionist, obscurantist and faddish versions of the Jesus story that have been put forward in recent years. Ongoing archaeology and ongoing discovery and study of ancient documents will continue to shed light on this old story. These discoveries may require an adjustment here and there. But thus far these discoveries have tended to confirm the reliability of the Gospels and disprove novel theories. I suspect that ongoing honest, competent research will do more of the same.[15]

The problem that most sceptics have is not that they really start off by believing that the available evidence shows that the text of the New Testament is of late origin or that the stories in it were concocted from thin air. In relation to why so many still maintain that the Gospels (and the rest of the New Testament) are unreliable, it is worth quoting an extended section of Craig Blomberg's 'Postscript' to his detailed work *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*:

... why do so many still reflect such intense skepticism and/or produce such aberrant portraits of Jesus? Antisupernaturalism is still deeply entrenched in some circles... Some, more aware of the proper use of historical criticism, nevertheless implement that criticism inconsistently. Others seem merely to bow to the pressure of consensus in certain circles, reiterating what is most academically respectable in those circles without ever seriously grappling with unfashionable alternatives. Surprisingly, many seem to remain unaware of a large number of the studies surveyed in this volume. Other individuals recognize the strength of our case, but realize the changes in their lives they would need to make if they took the religious steps that follow logically from an acceptance of the Gospels' message, and they are unprepared to make those changes.[16]

However, Blomberg also recognizes that some scholars have critically examined the evidence and come to different conclusions. The previous quotation continues:

In still other cases, however, scholars appear genuinely convinced that the historical evidence points to different conclusions. One must sincerely respect their right to this opinion, but this book is offered in the hope of illustrating the types of arguments that would have to be countered successfully if such opinion is to be persuasively supported. More often than not, it seems that the full weight of the case for the Gospels' trustworthiness has not been felt and the full range of arguments left unaddressed.[17]

Blomberg's book would repay careful reading by anyone who wishes to examine the evidence and arguments for the historical trustworthiness of the Gospel writings. Blomberg addresses the possible criticism that he is only writing to confirm his existing presuppositions. He states that his own research:

has self-consciously tried to avoid presupposing the infallibility of Scripture or the deity of Christ, but has merely attempted to follow the standard methods of historical enquiry. It derives from a willingness to consider the possibility that these traditional beliefs might have to be abandoned if historical investigation were to demonstrate them to be unwarranted. No such demonstration has yet appeared.[18]

Which of Blomberg's categories Derren Brown falls into only Brown himself knows. However, if he wishes to ensure, as he seems to do, that his current, sceptical beliefs are not 'hypocritical' or 'circular' and address *all* of the available evidence and arguments, then he needs to consider objectively the types of arguments that Blomberg presents.

The fundamental stumbling-block for most people in their consideration of such matters, is the problem that Aldous Huxley faced. The teaching of Jesus in the Gospel accounts impacts on the lives of those who read and accept it. If the New Testament is true, and Jesus rose from the dead, then we each need to respond to the teaching of Jesus in humility and repentance. That will require a change of lifestyle, a change of perspective and a change of priorities.

Whatever the reason for his current atheism, to maintain his claim to intellectual integrity in his beliefs, Derren Brown needs to ensure that he

has met Craig Blomberg's challenge in the quote above (Reference 17) – a challenge that everyone concerned with the truth of Christianity needs to consider. Have we felt the "the full weight of the case for the Gospels' trustworthiness" or have we left unaddressed "the full range of arguments" for trusting what we read there? Given such an honest consideration, it is difficult to see how Derren Brown could continue to describe as 'Excellent stuff' the book that sought to undermine the historical reliability of the New Testament, and which reduced his faith to 'tatters'.

Conclusions

So what can we learn from *Tricks of the Mind*, apart from how to improve our memory? There are probably lots of reasons contributing to why Brown lost his Christian faith. He stopped attending church and this probably contributed to the fact that he lost touch with the rational basis for his faith, if indeed he was ever put in touch with it in the first place, as he should have been (1 Peter 3:15). Brown is by no means the only person to assert that the Bible is a collection of fables, concocted long after the events it purports to describe – but he has a duty to support the claims about the Bible that he makes in *Tricks of the Mind* by more than mere assertion.

The unfortunate thing is that when Derren Brown met the arguments that appeared to disprove the Bible and hence his Christian faith, he simply gave in. At times, we all meet arguments that we cannot answer – but that does not mean that there is no answer. We need to meet such arguments with further investigation of the counter-argument. Even if we cannot immediately answer a particular argument from a sceptic, we need to balance that against the vast amount of evidence for our Christian beliefs and for our trust in the accuracy and historicity of the Bible. As we do investigate and find the appropriate responses, our confidence that such answers will exist in future cases increases. That doesn't give us permission to ignore future challenges – but it does mean that we will be less perturbed as we await the answer.

The key message for Derren Brown is that the Christian faith is founded on fact, and we have good reason to trust the historical reliability of the Bible, being based on original eyewitness

testimony. When we encounter those who would undermine the Biblical record, we must go back to the evidence that shows those documents to be reliable and remind ourselves that we believe in a God who works in and through history and has provided for a record of this activity, supremely in the accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For Derren Brown, it appears, 'the first to present his case' in any reasoned way sought to dismiss Biblical reliability. But there is another case that can be made – and it can be made well. That too must be heard and evaluated to ensure that he, and anyone else, avoids those errors of circular reasoning which consists of only considering the evidence that backs up the beliefs that he would like to be true.

References:

- [1] Derren Brown's programmes in the UK, transmitted on Channel 4, include: *Derren Brown: Mind Control*; *Trick of the Mind*; *Trick or Treat*; *Russian Roulette*; *Séance*; *The Heist*; *The System*.
- [2] From <http://www.en.wikipedia.com/derrenbrown/>, accessed May 2008 (no longer available). The current Derren Brown page is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derren_Brown.
- [3] Derren Brown *Tricks of the Mind* (Transworld, 2007). All page numbers in brackets refer to this book.
- [4] Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* (Transworld, 2006), back cover of hardback edition.
- [5] Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), pp.270-273.
- [6] Cf. C.S. Lewis' definition of faith as: 'the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods'. *Mere Christianity* (London & Glasgow: Collins, Fontana Books, 1960), p.121.
- [7] Proverbs 18:17 (NIV).
- [8] For example, F.F. Bruce *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (IVP, 2000); Craig L. Blomberg *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987); William Lane Craig *Reasonable Faith* (Revised Edition, Crossway Books, 1994); Josh McDowell *The New Evidence the Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson, 1999,

Single volume, new and revised edition).

[9] For example the references he gives on page 380.

[10] For an historical account of New Testament Biblical criticism, including contemporary versions, see chapters 1 and 2 of Craig L. Blomberg *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

[11] Craig L. Blomberg 'The Historical Reliability of the New Testament' in William Lane Craig *Reasonable Faith*, p.194.

[12] Craig A. Evans *Fabricating Jesus: how modern scholars distort the Gospels* (IVP, 2007), p.234.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*, p.193.

[15] *Ibid.*, p.235.

[16] Craig L. Blomberg *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987), pp.323-4.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.324.

[18] *Ibid.*, p.324.

© 2010 Chris Knight