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Believing Bullshit: How Not to Get Sucked into an Intellectual Black Hole

By Stephen Law



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This book identifies eight key mechanisms that can transform a set of ideas into a psychological flytrap. The author suggests that, like the black holes of outer space, from which nothing, not even light, can escape, our contemporary cultural landscape contains numerous intellectual black-holes—belief systems constructed in such a way that unwary passers-by can similarly find themselves drawn in. While such self-sealing bubbles of belief will most easily trap the gullible or poorly educated, even the most intelligent and educated of us are potentially vulnerable. Some of the world's greatest thinkers have fallen in, never to escape.

This witty, insightful critique will help immunize readers against the wiles of cultists, religious and political zealots, conspiracy theorists, promoters of flaky alternative medicines, and various other nutcases by clearly setting out the tricks of the trade by which such insidious belief systems are created and maintained.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A philosophy professor at the University of London, Law describes eight "intellectual black holes," traps that seem to lend credence to scientifically or rationally incorrect propositions. Recognizing such black holes as "playing the mystery card" (e.g., arguing that science can tell us whether ghosts exist) will help readers identify and critique illogical arguments. One particularly interesting concept is the "blunderbuss," which cites real but irrelevant illogical elements of, say, certain New Age beliefs. Another concept is what philosopher Daniel Dennett once called a "deepity," which Law defines as "saying something with two meanings"—one true but trivial, the other false but seemingly profound. Law shows how these and other verbal sleights of hand are used in a wide variety of belief systems, including the paranormal, homeopathy, Christian Science, and belief in UFOs. Law includes an entertaining appendix of fictional letters called, *pace* C.S. Lewis, the "Tapescrew Letters," which recapitulate his eight logical black holes. Though he writes clearly and persuasively, this is not a particularly easy read, but his subject is important and deserving of readers' attention. Illus. (Apr.)

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Review

"Everyone who values truth, reason, and evidence over sophistry should buy this book." --Chris French, professor and head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Goldsmiths, University of London and editor of *The Skeptic* magazine.

"Stephen Law offers us not only a primer on how not to believe but about why so many people do believe-bullsh*t, despite the lack of evidence for such beliefs, or even in the face of disconfirmatory evidence. It is **a roadmap to a promised land** free of undue credulity, where the best ideas win and 'intellectual black holes' no longer suck people in. *Believing Bullsh*t* should be read by every college freshman and every person seeking public office, and its strategies memorized and put to use by every critical thinker." --D. J. Grothe, President of the James Randi Educational Foundation and host of *For Good Reason*

"Sadly, the people who would benefit most from *Believing Bullsh*t* are the least likely to read it. We all get taken in by bullsh*t sometimes, though, and if you think you don't, **you definitely should buy this book**. But you should anyway." --Nigel Warburton, senior lecturer in philosophy, The Open University (London) and author of *Philosophy: The Basics*.

About the Author

Stephen Law (Oxford, England) is a senior lecturer in philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London; provost for the Centre for Inquiry UK; and the editor of *Think: Philosophy for Everyone* (a journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy). He is the author of numerous books for adults as well as children, including *The Greatest Philosophers*, *Companion Guide to Philosophy*, *The War for Children's Minds*, and *Really, Really Big Questions*, among other works.

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