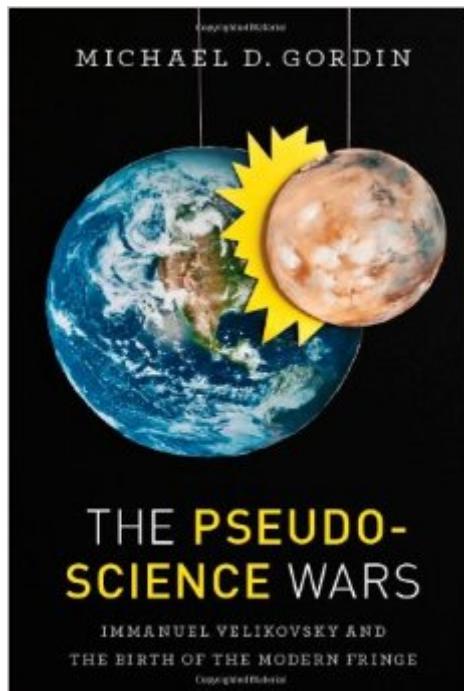


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The Pseudoscience Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky And The Birth Of The Modern Fringe



Synopsis

Properly analyzed, the collective mythological and religious writings of humanity reveal that around 1500 BC, a comet swept perilously close to Earth, triggering widespread natural disasters and threatening the destruction of all life before settling into solar orbit as Venus, our nearest planetary neighbor. Sound implausible? Well, from 1950 until the late 1970s, a huge number of people begged to differ, as they devoured Immanuel Velikovsky's major best-seller, *Worlds in Collision*, insisting that perhaps this polymathic thinker held the key to a new science and a new history. Scientists, on the other hand, assaulted Velikovsky's book, his followers, and his press mercilessly from the get-go. In *The Pseudoscience Wars*, Michael D. Gordin resurrects the largely forgotten figure of Velikovsky and uses his strange career and surprisingly influential writings to explore the changing definitions of the line that separates legitimate scientific inquiry from what is deemed bunk, and to show how vital this question remains to us today. Drawing on a wealth of previously unpublished material from Velikovsky's personal archives, Gordin presents a behind-the-scenes history of the writer's career, from his initial burst of success through his growing influence on the counterculture, heated public battles with such luminaries as Carl Sagan, and eventual eclipse. Along the way, he offers fascinating glimpses into the histories and effects of other fringe doctrines, including creationism, Lysenkoism, parapsychology, and more—all of which have surprising connections to Velikovsky's theories. Science today is hardly universally secure, and scientists seem themselves beset by critics, denialists, and those they label "pseudoscientists" as seen all too clearly in battles over evolution and climate change. The *Pseudoscience Wars* simultaneously reveals the surprising Cold War roots of our contemporary dilemma and points readers to a different approach to drawing the line between knowledge and nonsense.

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Customer Reviews

This is one of a few books that give Velikovsky a fair shake. Although not a supporter of Velikovsky's theories, Professor Gordin treats his subject with the evenhanded analysis of a dispassionate science historian. The out-of-this-world (literally and figuratively) theories of Velikovsky - about the cosmos, formation of the planet, electromagnetic celestial mechanics and the effects of planetary genesis and orbits on human history, as described in many various ancient myths - are expressed in the book without derisive criticism. Immanuel Velikovsky (1895-1979) was a Russian born Jewish psychiatrist who established a practice of psychiatry and Freudian psychoanalysis in Palestine from 1924 to 1939. He published several papers in medical journals, in which he was first to suggest that specific changes in EEG (electroencephalogram) were diagnostic of epilepsy. Although an admirer of Freud, Velikovsky set out to disprove the latter's claim, that Moses was a follower of the Pharaoh Akhenaton or Pharaoh himself, as Freud suggested in "Moses and Monotheism". Velikovsky postulated the theory that Akhenaten was the model for Oedipus in Greek mythology. This began a second career of research and writings in archeology, biblical investigation, and cosmology in which Velikovsky tried to change the accepted chronology of ancient Egyptian kings and dynasties by interpreting or misinterpreting ancient documents (Eg: the Ipuwer papyrus, Mesopotamian cuneiforms etc). In 1939, Velikovsky travelled to New York, ostensibly to do research for his planned book "Oedipus and Akhenaton" but remained permanently in the USA after the WW II broke out.

I'm a philosopher of science, and I read this book with the History and Philosophy of Science Reading Group at the University of Notre Dame in Spring 2013. My assessment of the book is thoroughly positive, and I believe most of the other participants would agree. It is an engaging and fascinating narrative, easy to read through for pleasure, but still having enough depth and scholarly engagement for hard-nosed academics. I recommend it wholeheartedly to anyone who enjoys reading about science (and its counterpart, pseudoscience). Philosophically, Gordin's book is extremely interesting for its approach to (what we philosophers call) the "demarcation problem." How do you distinguish -- demarcate -- that activity we call science from non-scientific pretenders? Common examples in the second category include alchemy, astrology, phrenology (studying the

shape of skulls), creation science, and science under the Nazi regime and Lysenko in the Soviet Union. More controversial or difficult cases include Freudian psychology, Marxism, and evolution by natural selection ("Darwinism"). A classic attempted solution to this problem is from the Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper. Popper said that "falsifiability" was the crucial feature: If your hypothesis makes predictions that can be empirically refuted, then (and only then) is it science. Even today, scientists offer this solution when creation science (and intelligent design, a descendent better adapted to our regulatory environment) rears its head. But contemporary philosophers of science generally agree that refutation isn't as clear-cut as Poppers solution assumes.

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