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# *Skeptical Adversaria*

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2009, Number 3 (Autumn)

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The Quarterly Newsletter of The Association for Skeptical Enquiry



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

Early on in my career as a clinical psychologist I used, just on one occasion, electric shock aversion therapy.

The recipient of this was 'Mr J', a family man, whose complaint was that he was constantly tormented with the idea that he was homosexual despite averring that he was exclusively heterosexual. He had undergone, amongst other treatments, extensive 'talking therapy' from a specialist in sexual problems, but to no avail. However, he had obtained temporary relief from aversion therapy, which he himself had demanded his psychiatrist arrange for him, expressing great anger about all the years he had wasted talking to people about his problem and getting nowhere.

The therapist who had administered his previous aversion therapy was unavailable when, having relapsed, Mr J was re-referred but Mr J was adamant that this was the treatment he needed and I agreed to carry it out.

I adhered to a standard protocol at that time whereby the patient was shown a series of slides of naked or semi-naked men and women and at each presentation he signalled if he felt sexually aroused. Then, if the slide was a male he could receive a mild electric shock on his forearm; whether or not he did so was randomly determined. (Random schedules of reward and

punishment are known to lead to more enduring conditioned responses.)

At the time all this was happening, reports had appeared in medical and psychiatric journals claiming that sexual orientation could be altered by aversion therapy. I had also undertaken a placement at a prison in which aversion therapy was used with sex offenders (though I was not involved with this).

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**The American Psychological Association (APA) has made a formal declaration that therapy designed to change a person's sexual orientation does not work.**

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At this time however, the gay rights movement was making progress and in 1973, as a result of lobbying by protesters and more enlightened psychiatrists, 'homosexuality' as a disorder was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-II) of the American Psychiatric Association. This was replaced in DSM-III by the category 'ego-dystonic homosexuality' which in turn was removed from DSM-III-R in 1987.

These developments represented the growing acknowledgment that amongst

the population, the variations in same/different sex preferences are natural and healthy and not associated with any pathological process.

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Fast forward to the present time. In a recent report entitled 'Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation' (<http://bit.ly/VSGUu>) the American Psychological Association (APA) has made a formal declaration that therapy designed to change a person's sexual orientation does not

work. An APA task force conducted a systematic review of the peer-reviewed journal literature on sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) and concluded that 'efforts to change sexual orientation are unlikely to be successful and involve some risk of harm, contrary to the claims of SOCE practitioners and advocates'. The task force concluded that 'the population that undergoes SOCE tends to have strongly conservative religious views that lead them to seek to change their sexual orientation. Thus, the appropriate application of affirmative therapeutic interventions for those who seek SOCE involves therapist acceptance, support, and understanding of clients and the facilitation of clients'

active coping, social support, and identity exploration and development, without imposing a specific sexual orientation identity outcome.' (Yes, I know, the English is truly dreadful.)

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**I can see now (in fact I knew this at the time) that Mr J's treatment made no sense.**

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But what of Mr J? He attended for his treatment at weekly intervals and expressed considerable gratitude for my endeavours. However his obsessions continued unabated and had not resolved by the time I had moved to another post.

Since then, reviews of clinical research on aversion therapy and homosexuality have concluded that the studies were flawed and enthusiasm for this treatment was misplaced. In any case, I can see now (in fact I knew this at the time) that Mr J's treatment made no logical sense. (Currently the focus of therapy would probably be on strategies for how Mr J could control his obsessional thinking.) But the man was desperate for this treatment; it seemed to have helped him before, and his psychiatrist was insistent that I should go ahead. You see, I was only obeying orders.

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

This puzzle is one I made up but I am sure it's been discovered many times before.

### The mystery of the missing odd numbers

Amelia and her boyfriend Ivan are passionately engaged in their favourite joint activity: discussing mathematical paradoxes!

'How about this one?' says Amelia. 'Choose two positive whole numbers (with replacement) at random. What's the probability that their sum is an even number?'

'Easy!' says Ivan. If they are both odd or both even then their sum will also be even. If one of them is odd their sum will be odd. There are four possible

combinations of the two numbers, even/even, even/odd, odd/even and odd/odd. Each has a probability of 1 in 4. So the chances of an even sum are twice 1 in 4, namely 1 in 2. Therefore half the time you'll get an even sum and half the time you'll get an odd sum.'

'Phew!' says Amelia. 'The simplest answer is just to say that half of all numbers are even and half are odd so you would expect the same for the sum of any two numbers.'

'Yes', Ivan replies. 'But what is the answer for the *product* of any two numbers chosen at random?'

'Half even, half odd again', says Amelia.

'Think again!' exclaims Ivan. If at least one of the numbers is even then their product will be even. You can only get an odd product if *both* numbers are odd. So it's 3 in 4 for an even product and 1 in 4 (with two odd numbers) for an odd product. By your reckoning 3 out of 4 numbers are even and only 1 in 4 is odd.'

'So what's happened to all the missing odd numbers?' asks Amelia.

Answer on page 11

### Call for Contributions

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Sceptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

## ONE OF US

So much of what is presented to the consumer as natural, wholesome and ethical, and hence worth the extra cost that this entails, turns out to be a sham, based at best on unfounded ideals and beliefs but all too often motivated by the same self-interest that drives any commercial enterprise or profession.

Thus truth, honesty and good science are welcome allies so long as they remain loyal to the cause, but their services may be quickly dismissed when their support wavers: cf. alternative medicine.

The organic food industry has recently been on the defensive, some of its fundamental selling points having been illuminated by the harsh light of reality when the Food Standards Agency (FSA) published a report that concluded organic food has no more nutritional value than conventional fare (*Note 1*).

Step on to the platform Mr Andrew Ellison, Personal Finance Editor of the *Times*! In an article on 5.9.09 headed 'Organic food is a waste of money' he observes that 'Food marketers and estate agents have much in common. Both use words of inappropriate grandiosity to sell distinctly average products. Where most of us see a shed, estate agents see a Swedish-timber summer outhouse. Where most of us see a burger, food marketers see a grass-fed, Highland-reared steak haché.' (According to Mr Ellison the magazine *Which?* has estimated that organic food costs on average 60 per cent more than conventional produce.)

He then summarises the findings of a blind taste test that he and his colleagues conducted on supermarkets' standard, premium and organic ranges (*Note 2*). Surprisingly organic food fared very badly in this taste study.

Next Mr Ellison challenges other claims of the organic food industry, first citing the FSA report on the absence of nutritional benefit and then questioning the claim that organic farming is better for the environment. He notes that 'organic milk' generates more carbon dioxide emissions than standard milk and uses significantly more land'.

Next he dismisses scares about dangerous levels of pesticides in

conventional produce, noting that these are at miniscule levels that are not harmful. 'In fact, some studies have shown that the incidence of cancer among farmers, who are routinely exposed to relatively high levels of pesticide, is lower than in the wider population' (*Note 3*).

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### **Food marketers and estate agents have much in common. Both use words of inappropriate grandiosity to sell distinctly average products.**

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Finally he acknowledges that 'The animal welfare standards of organic farmers are generally considered better than average'. Personally speaking, this fact alone would persuade me to choose organically farmed meat produce, except that I don't eat meat, precisely because of my concern for animal welfare.

Mr Ellison rounds off his article with a discussion of the irrational and over-idealistic approach that characterises the organic food lobby.

Sceptics will have differing opinions on organic farming and the evidence for and against. I have no expertise in this but often find myself disappointed by the close-mindedness of its advocates, such as Lord Melchett of the Soil Association, whenever they speak on this and related matters, such as GM crops. It comes across as something of a sacred cow - though no doubt one that has been organically farmed.

#### **Notes**

1. At the time of writing it has been announced by DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) that organic farming may be reducing the population of songbirds because their winter supply of seeds is reduced by ploughing after harvesting.

([http://www.daelnet.co.uk/countrynews/country\\_news\\_09092009.cfm](http://www.daelnet.co.uk/countrynews/country_news_09092009.cfm)).

2. [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/moncy/consumer\\_affairs/article6821784.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/moncy/consumer_affairs/article6821784.ece)

3. However, a recent survey by the insect charity Bug Life and the Soil Association blames the dramatic decline in bee populations on the pesticides neonicotinoids, used in large scale arable farming and with gardeners' pot plants (reference as for Note 1).

#### **Not One of Us**

On this occasion the distinction of not being one of us belongs to Ms Laura Coventry for her article entitled 'Fancy footwork that's so beneficial for your well-being' in Scotland's *Daily Record*, 9.9.09. In her article she describes her experience of a one-hour session of reflexology (foot-pummeling) at a beauty salon in Stewarton, Ayrshire.

'Many people are a bit funny about having their feet touched' she reminds us. 'But once you get over the initial paranoia, it's actually quite relaxing and enjoyable'. Nothing controversial in that. But then Ms Coventry launches this piece of gibberish at us:

'Using various pressure points in the feet, reflexology aims to assess the balance of the body.'

'The balance of the body'. I must remember to have this looked into when I next see my doctor. But look what follows.

'A complementary therapy for decades, reflexology is beneficial for many health complaints as it is believed to release stagnant energy.'

'It is believed'? Could Ms Coventry inform us by whom? As for 'stagnant energy': a wonderful expression, impressive sounding, yet devoid of any real meaning and thus ideal to take its place in the vocabulary of the quack practitioner!

## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

**'Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science And Pseudo-Religions' by Ronald H. Fritze.**  
**London: Reaktion Books, 2009 (pp 304), ISBN: 978 1 86189 430 4.**

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Ronald Fritze, who has already published on such matters to acclaim, has now produced in this book a classic work in the field of sceptical critique of pseudo-history. Although it will naturally not replace existing treatises altogether, it will become an indispensable general source and one of the first 'ports of call' for researchers and students in this area.

As has become the trend, Fritze surveys not only current fringe ideas and sceptical commentary on them but the entire post-Enlightenment period. He deals with almost all the major fringe trends of the last two centuries (and with ideas which once were mainstream but have now been debunked or forgotten) and with the critiques offered by predecessors of contemporary sceptics. But he is also very much up to date; for instance, he rehearses the entire vexed and complex story of 'Kennewick Man' (mysterious ancient human remains found in Washington State in 1996), including the latest available legal decisions and provisional academic conclusions. (To summarise: with support from postmodernist/anti-scientific thinkers and at times from the relevant governments and legal systems, Native American activists such as Vine Deloria – like their equivalents in Australia – have persuaded many 'indigenous' people (a) that their ancestors were indeed 'created' where they now live, as their traditional myths relate, rather than forming part of any general diaspora from East Africa such as has been revealed by scientific archaeology; and (b) that all ancient human remains found in their lands, even anomalous and hence potentially very important remains such as those of KM, **must** be those of their own forebears and therefore need to be protected from study as sacred, and

indeed ceremonially re-buried. Opponents of these irrational ideas, including leading critics of postmodernist excesses such as Alan Sokal as well as mainstream scientific archaeologists, have won the latest round of legal exchanges over KM; but given the current political climate it is unlikely that this matter is finally settled.)

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**Fritze does not mock gratuitously, recognising that most fringe writers are sincere (if not adequately informed or trained).**

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A large proportion of the non-standard material surveyed by Fritze is in fact nonsense (whether or not that was apparent when it was produced) and he critiques the fringe without compunction. On the other hand, he is conspicuously fair-minded. Indeed, in some cases, e.g. in commenting on mainstream critics of the Velikovskyan major-planet-catastrophist & chronological-revisionist movement, he arguably goes beyond this (though **some** of these critics, notably Carl Sagan, clearly **were** themselves unfair at times). He examines the socio-cultural and quasi-academic background tendencies involved in the development of each tradition of non-standard work, and acknowledges such strengths as may be found in non-standard amateur material. Fritze does not mock gratuitously, recognising that most fringe writers are sincere (if not adequately informed or trained). But he is far from humourless, and his writing is engaging and perspicuous as well as scholarly.

Fritze's chapters deal with: Atlantis and other 'lost continents'; the diffusionist pseudo-history of the

Americas; 'racist cosmogonies and pseudo-history' (two chapters); catastrophism (and chronological revisionism); and Afrocentrist pseudo-history. There is, almost inevitably, a stronger focus on American issues than on those arising elsewhere in the world; for instance, little is said about fringe views of European (pre-)history. But, allowing for this, there are few outright omissions, and these largely involve individual thinkers rather than entire strains of non-standard historical thought. Obvious examples include William McGlone and his colleagues (perhaps the most rational members of the 'American epigraphist' tradition offering diffusionist accounts of the history of the Americas) and Anatoly Fomenko (the best-known proponent of major chronological revisions involving the last two millennia). Some of these authors are very important; but, as noted below, only so much ground can be covered in any one book of reasonable size as determined by the publishers.

As a sceptical historical linguist, this reviewer might have liked to find in this book a somewhat greater focus on linguistic matters. I include here non-standard amateur philologising or etymologising (ideas on the origins of languages and individual words), speculative epigraphics (the identification and decipherment of texts or alleged texts, e.g. the specifically linguistic work of the diffusionist pseudo-historian Barry Fell), 'out-of-place' spoken or written languages, theories concerning the conspiratorial concoction of languages or language data, etc. Linguistic 'evidence' is often adduced by pseudo-historians in support of their wider theses, and more generally the details of language data often furnish key evidence in the discussion of historical and archaeological theories,

fringe or mainstream. Fritze does refer in places to such matters (Helena Blavatsky's concocted language 'Senzar', speculations on linguistic relationships in early North America, the purported use of Welsh in the Americas as a result of Prince Madoc's supposed voyage, the allegedly Phoenician Paraiba Inscription, Zecharia Sitchin on Sumerian, the outrageous philological-cum-etymological proposals of the British Israelites, etc); but perhaps not as

much as might be hoped, and with very few actual linguistic details.

On the other hand, specialists in other disciplines might make similar points about gaps in the treatment of their own favoured subjects; and one cannot expect one scholar's grasp to extend equally to **all** relevant disciplines. And, in an admittedly general book such as this, only so much detail can be given and only so much ground covered. (Sheer **errors** of fact

and cases of awkward wording are very few indeed.)

Overall, the work cannot be recommended too highly to all with an interest in these matters: active researchers/writers, sceptics generally, or those who might otherwise be tempted to accept fringe ideas. It is, as Thucydides famously said, a possession for ever.

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## **'59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot' by Richard Wiseman, London: Macmillan, 2009, ISBN-13: 978-0230744295.**

Reviewed by Barbara Melville

At the beginning of my writing career, I was asked to write a few self-help articles. I was never questioned on where I got my information, and when I asked about citing sources, I was told, 'It's just self-help – make it up as you go along. I have to wonder how many others adopt this approach to self-help. Richard Wiseman certainly doesn't, and every well-researched chapter is a breath of fresh air.

*59 Seconds* draws from peer-reviewed research, offering life tips that can be implemented quickly. All sorts of topics are covered from relationships to decision-making, and each chapter contains short tips and exercises. There is practical advice for all sorts of life challenges, including losing weight,

nailing job interviews, and tackling procrastination. For those interested in further reading, all Wiseman's references are noted at the back of the book.

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**If you find yourself getting angry at this review, don't bother punching a pillow – it'll only make you feel worse.**

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With my creative writing course looming (and the creative juices running dry) I chose to focus my efforts on the chapters on creativity, and stress, which I found particularly useful. Even with a specific focus in mind, I saw myself

(and my loved ones) on several pages. Questions that had once niggled at me now seem to make sense. Why do I write better in the garden? What telltale signs are really on display when I'm lying?

Wiseman's writing is cheerful, witty, and easy to follow. The information within is just so darned interesting, including facts that seem rather unusual and counterintuitive. Another high point is that several myths are dispelled along the way. For example, if you find yourself getting angry at this review, don't bother punching a pillow – it'll only make you feel worse.

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## **LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE**

### **Mark Newbrook**

#### **'I Can': linguists, teachers and children's language**

The registered charity 'I Can' (<http://www.ican.org.uk>) has produced a series of booklets on children's 'Speech, Language and Communication Needs' (SLCN). They naturally focus on British English and on the **problems** that some children (even if native speakers) experience in this area – and the

consequences for the children and for society. The relevant concerns are not new (witness the 1975 Bullock Report); and (although itself lacking in examples) this new material is heavily documented from academic sources and is potentially very helpful. It is especially strong on probable links between linguistic deficits of different kinds (e.g. delayed

acquisition of pronunciation features and spelling problems such as dyslexia).

But there is a need for caution here. The linguistic material referred to by 'I Can' is noticeably slanted towards psycholinguistics at the expense of the equally relevant field of sociolinguistics. As the vast majority of sociolinguists have agreed since William Labov's work of the early 1960s, much of what is

regarded by non-linguists (including some teachers) as linguistic deficit is in fact a matter of linguistic **difference** between socially-defined groups of native speakers: non-standard vs standard grammar, skills in rapping vs argumentation, etc. Some students' verbal skills and strong grasp of core linguistic structures may remain unacknowledged because these skills and linguistic forms are not those regarded as acceptable or useful by the educational establishment.

Admittedly, some sociolinguists have overstated this point; and in any case it does not imply that genuine deficits in children's speech or writing (even if these are less common than might be imagined) should not be addressed urgently. Neither does it mean that standard dialects are not crucial in modern society (especially, but not only, in respect of written language), or that children who can rap or text fluently but cannot yet argue a point coherently do not need to acquire the latter skill. But **these** children are not thereby 'worse' at language *per se*.

The 'I Can' material is not so unsophisticated as to suggest that they **are**; and it does acknowledge the role of social 'class' in the linguistic acculturation of children (exposure to books, etc) **and** differences between the language requirements of home and school. But (perhaps partly through striving for 'political correctness') it rather downplays the notion of social-group-based linguistic differentiation, and the issues in this area are thus soft-pedalled, to the disadvantage of teachers without a good knowledge of linguistics (e.g. most science teachers).

One key topic which is almost totally absent here is that of the need for early acquisition of active fluency in 'second dialects/accents' by children growing up in highly 'dialect-divergent' areas such as rural North-East Scotland. These children's native speech, while fluent and wholly appropriate locally, is not readily understood elsewhere and is very different from British norms for written

English. And this need can easily be presented positively: such children can become bi-dialectal much more readily than can middle-class children in e.g. South-East England, with 'empowering' consequences.

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**Most linguists would regard knowledge of more than one language, if properly managed, as a major *positive* asset in further language learning and learning generally.**

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In addition, 'I Can' seems to see bilingualism as at best neutral in respect of SLCN. Most linguists would regard knowledge of more than one language, if properly managed, as a major **positive** asset in further language learning and learning generally.

**Yellow adjectives**

A rather unusual phenomenon in linguistic studies involves the psychological phenomenon known as synaesthesia: the 'mixing' of senses, for instance the perception of sounds as smells (as well as sounds) or the ascription of colours to personality traits (people may be seen as 'purple' or 'turquoise'). People who experience synaesthesia generally regard it as an asset rather than a 'condition', and some use it as a ground for artistic endeavour (I recently met a poet whose work is deeply informed by her synaesthesia and is titled accordingly).

I once taught English grammar to a student (a native speaker) with synaesthesia. One manifestation involved the ascription of colours to 'parts of speech'. She had experienced this ever since learning the relevant concepts. Adjectives were yellow, nouns brown, etc. In consequence, it was very difficult to persuade her that she was mistaken in any of her parsing decisions. She and I finally agreed to distinguish between e.g. 'adjectives' and 'syn-adjectives'. Interestingly, the cases of

mismatch were all marginal in one way or another.

**Whence wisdom?**

The flavour of the month seems to be 'training'; without this, apparently, no-one can do a job. In 2008, a family Thomas The Tank-Engine outing had to be cancelled because a man who had played the Fat Controller to everyone's delight for 25 years had never been 'trained' to do so! But some readers may have shared my experience of meeting a completely unqualified expert on some intellectual subject whose only 'training' has been their wide and deep reading. (And of course 'trainers' must themselves have been trained...) Further, one meets people altogether untutored in a given scholarly discipline (or **any** such discipline) who grasp it amazingly rapidly on exposure. I knew a Melbourne woman from a very non-academic background (her only relevant asset was that she knew some Hungarian, through her family) who at once mastered even the most awkward aspects of the 1<sup>st</sup> Year linguistics material which I showed her. In a tutorial, she would be the most likely future PhD candidate.

In a similar way, my Cumbrian lady-friend's talent for learning new subjects amazes me. She can even commentate on cricket ('Two runs there...He's walked'), despite having little interest in it and no prior exposure. In philosophy it is less important to learn facts, but J's natural grasp of logic and argumentation is again outstanding. For instance, she has arrived at a moderate version of postmodernism without having even heard the word until recently (from me)! I do not myself **agree** with all of her philosophical views, but she defends them admirably with no background knowledge at all. Such people should surely be encouraged – and their talent studied (even though some of them become 'nutters'!).

## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

**A**SKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to <http://forum.ecso.org/>.

### Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380  
Roßdorf, Germany  
Tel.: +49 6154/695021  
Fax: +49 6154/695022  
Website: <http://www.ecso.org/>

### 14th European Skeptics Congress

The 14th European Skeptics Congress will be hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society in Budapest in 2010. The ECSO website will have updates on this but why not visit the Hungarian Skeptic

Society website, which is very informative and is in English?

<http://www.szkeptikustarsasag.hu/en/index.php>.

## OF INTEREST

### Simon Singh and the British Chiropractic Association

For updates on the latest in Simon Singh's libel case involving the British Chiropractic Association go to [www.senseaboutscience.org/freedebate](http://www.senseaboutscience.org/freedebate).

Sile Lane of Sense about Science inform us: 'We are in the process of setting up meetings with ministers and front-benchers and will update you on that over the summer. In particular, we are looking at public interest defences and have got together with Index on Censorship and PEN to start working on that. It has been helpful to hear about other cases where scientists and medics have been threatened with libel action. Some of these are likely to get a bit of publicity over coming weeks and we'll be putting information about other cases on our website. We are also interested in speaking to journalists, authors and editors about the impact of legal fears on what is published because we are compiling a file to present to the CMS parliamentary committee and to Government. There have been lots of requests for campaign materials. Your kind donations are making a real difference to the campaign. We need to do a reprint of materials – if anyone can sponsor this (approx £340) do let me know. Keep checking our website for updated coverage and news'.

See 'Jack of Kent' for legal commentary:

<http://jackofkent.blogspot.com/2009/07/why-bca-v-singh-matters-to-me.html>

An article by Fiona Godlee ('Keep libel laws out of science') in the British Medical Journal (8<sup>th</sup> July 2009) can be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/lltkz4>.

Leicester Skeptics in the Pub organiser Simon Perry has spearheaded a letter writing campaign resulting in hundreds of chiropractic companies taking down their websites. There is a follow-up campaign planned. Those on Facebook, feel free to join this page: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=94697748341>

For more blogs also go to <http://www.zenosblog.com/>

### Request from Chris French

'Both Christine Mohr and I would like to find a good overview article on the normality of paranormal belief across times and cultures. Anyone out there know of one (or more)? Replies to [c.french@gold.ac.uk](mailto:c.french@gold.ac.uk) please.'

### THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

#### Website

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>

#### Email

[c.french@gold.ac.uk](mailto:c.french@gold.ac.uk)

#### Venue

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room 256, Richard Hoggart

Building, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. All talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book in advance. For further information consult the website.

### TAM IN LONDON

See previous newsletters. Keep your eye on <http://www.tamlondon.org/>.

### SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>

*Note: you are advised to check the relevant website to make sure that the details of any meeting you wish to attend have not been changed.*

### BIRMINGHAM

For details of latest developments email Jon Donniss at: [jonnodonniss@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jonnodonniss@yahoo.co.uk)

### BRISTOL

Anyone interested in setting up a SitP in Bristol should email: [richard.craig@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:richard.craig@bristol.ac.uk)

### EDINBURGH

#### Websites:

<http://www.geocities.com/edinburghskeptics/skepticsinthepub.html> or <http://edinburgh.skepticsinthepub.org/>

*(Note: the latter website appears to be the more up-to-date.)*

**Email:**

'We have a new email address. If you need to contact the society you can get to us here at [edskeptics@gmail.com](mailto:edskeptics@gmail.com). Alternatively you can still get in touch with me (Alex Pryce) via my personal email at: [info@chimaeraproductions.co.uk](mailto:info@chimaeraproductions.co.uk).'

**Blog:**

<http://www.edinburghskeptics.wordpress.com>

**Forum:**

<http://edinburghskeptics.phpbbhosts.co.uk/>

**Twitter:**

<http://twitter.com/edskeptics>

**Facebook**

Skeptics in the Pub, Edinburgh:

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#group.php?gid=49320257971>

**Edinburgh Skeptics:**

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#group.php?gid=61379127151&ref=ts>

**Venue:**

Talks: The Newsrooms, Leith Street, Edinburgh, EH1

Socials: The Waverely, St Mary's Street, Edinburgh EH1

(Please note that these are the venues currently given at

<http://edinburgh.skepticsinthepub.org/>)

**Programme**

Meetings are on the first and third Thursdays of the month, the first one being a 'social sceptics night'. The following presentations will begin at 8.00 pm. Donations on the night (£2.50) are welcome to cover expenses.

**15 Oct: Nick Pope**

*UFO sightings*

**19 Nov: Stuart Ritchie and Marc Surtees**

*'Evolution vs creationism' debate*

**24 Nov: BBC Documentary**

*The Genius of Charles Darwin*

**21 Jan 2010: Daniela Rudloff**

*Title to be announced*

**18 Feb 2010: Charles Paxton**

*Statistics and cryptozoology*

**18 March 2010: Ciaran O'Keefe**

*Forensic Psychology*

**15 Apr 2010: David Colquhoun (TBC)**

*How quackery corrupts real science*

**20 May 2010: Gordon Rutter**

*The Fortean Society*

**17 June 2010: Mike Heap**

*Authenticity and its influence on behaviour attitudes and beliefs*

**15 July 2010: To be arranged****16 Sept 2010 Stuart Wilson**

*Details to be confirmed*

**21 Oct 2010: To be arranged**

**18 Nov 2010:** Speaker(s) to be arranged  
*Religious debate*

**Other Events****October 2009: 'Samhain Skeptics'**

*Four weekly meetings during the lead-up to Hallowe'en (with Richard Wiseman on Oct 7)*

**17 Dec: Skeptics' End of Year Party**  
(details to be announced)

**1 May 2010 at 12 am: 'Mary Kings Ghost Fest'** at Mary Kings Close, High Street, Edinburgh EH1

**4 Aug 2010 at 10.37 am** (*some mistake surely-Ed.*): **'Skepticamp'** with the Edinburgh Skeptics at The Newsrooms, Leith Street.

**LEEDS**

<http://www.leedsskeptics.org/>

'Leeds Skeptics in the Pub is a group that meets monthly to discuss issues of science, reason and rational thinking. We usually begin with a short talk by a notable speaker and then a general discussion follows over a pint (or two, or many!). We meet on the third Saturday of every month at 2pm, entry is free.'

**Venue:**

Carpe Diem, Calverley Street, Leeds, LS1 3ED

**Programme**

**Sept 19:** Discussion of Darren Brown's lottery prediction

Further events to be announced on the website.

**LEICESTER****Local website:**

<http://leicester.skepticsinthepub.org/>

**Email:**

[leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com](mailto:leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com)

**Facebook:**

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=12736582903>

**Venue:**

The Square Bar, 5-9 Hotel Street, Leicester, LE1 5AW

**Programme**

The following presentations will begin at 7.30 pm:

**20 Oct: Nick Davies**

*Bad news: What's wrong with the media.*

**17 Nov: Chris French**

*The psychology of alien contact and abduction*

**15 Dec: David Colquhoun**

*How quackery corrupts real science*

**19 Jan 2010: Andy Lewis**

*What makes a successful alternative medicine?*

**16 Feb 2010: Kevin Byron**

*Science and uncommon sense II*

**16 Mar 2010: Simon Singh**

*Science in the media*

**LONDON****Website:**

<http://london.skepticsinthepub.org/>

**Email:**

[pub@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:pub@skeptic.org.uk)

**Venue:**

Skeptics in the Pub, London, meets (usually) once every month at The Penderel's Oak, Holborn. A £2 donation is requested to cover the guest speaker's travelling expenses and sundries. All are welcome. Turn up at any time during the evening. The room is open for food and drink from about 5.30pm and talks start at 7.30pm.

There is also an associated Facebook group you can join (see website).

**Programme****21 Sept: David Aaronovitch**

*Voodoo histories*

**19 Oct: Jennifer Rohn**

*Boffins and geeks, madmen and freaks: why are scientists still such a PR disaster?*

**Wesminster Skeptics in the Pub, London (TBC)**

A possible new meeting of Skeptics in the Pub focusing on policy related matters. The intention is to engage more with policy makers, decision makers, and regulators. It will complement, and



will be little sister to, the main London Skeptics in the Pub.

For more detail, please visit:

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=203939300182>

or email:

[westminster@skepticsinthepub.org](mailto:westminster@skepticsinthepub.org)

## LIVERPOOL

<http://www.merseysideskeptics.org.uk/>

### Programme

Three fortnightly meetings have been announced, from 8.00 to 11.00 pm (see below for venues).

**Sept 17: Chris French** (i)

*The Psychology of Anomalous Experiences*

**1 Oct:** No speaker announced (ii)

**15 Oct: Ariane Sherine** (i)

*The Atheist Bus Campaign and The Atheist's Guide To Christmas*

(i) Crown Hotel, 43 Lime Street, Liverpool, L1 1JQ

(ii) Doctor Duncan's, St Johns Lane, Liverpool, L1 1HF

## OXFORD

For details go to the following website:

<http://oxford.skepticsinthepub.org/>

### SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE

[www.senseaboutscience.org](http://www.senseaboutscience.org)

See the website for details of activities, publications, etc. Note also the following:

The next 'Standing up for Science Media Workshop' will be held on Friday 5th November at The Royal Society of Edinburgh. For more information contact Julia on:

[jwilson@senseaboutscience.org](mailto:jwilson@senseaboutscience.org).

### CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

<http://cfilondon.org/>.

#### Programme

The meetings below will all be held at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL. Go to the website for details of costs and booking.

**29 Oct, 7-9pm: Stephen Law & Alistair McGrath**

*Does the natural world point to God?*

**7 Nov, 11am-3pm: Darren Naish & Charles Paxton**

*Monsters from the deep*

**30 Jan 2010, 11.00am-3pm: Simon Singh, Andy Lewis and others**

*Trick or treatment?*

**6 March, 2010, 11am-3pm. Nick Pope Adrian Shine, David Clarke, and one other**

*Monsters vs aliens*

### SUNDAY TIMES OXFORD LITERARY FESTIVAL, 2010, AT CHRIST CHURCH COLLEGE

<http://www.sundaytimes-oxfordliteraryfestival.co.uk/>

For the full programme visit the website, but note the following (times to be announced):

**25 Mar, 2010: Simon Singh**

*Trick or treatment? (On the ongoing court case)*

**26 Mar, 2010: John Polkinghorne vs. David Papineau**

*Does science reveal the mind of God?*

**27th Mar, 2010: Ben Goldacre**

Also starring: Richard Wiseman, Stephen Law and others. More details to be announced.

### HEALTHWATCH

<http://www.healthwatch-uk.org/>

Open meeting and Annual General Meeting on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2009 at The Medical Society of London, 11 Chandos Street, Cavendish Square, London W1M 0EB

Nick Ross (HealthWatch President) will present the HealthWatch Annual Award to Sir Iain Chalmers.

#### Programme

6.30pm: Reception

7.00pm: AGM

7.30pm: Presentation of Student Prize

7.40pm: Presentation of HealthWatch Award

8.45pm: Buffet dinner at a cost of £35

All are welcome at the meeting, but only members may vote at the Annual General Meeting.

Registration form at:

<http://www.healthwatch-uk.org/AGM09.doc>

## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

### Interview with James Randi

From Mark Williams (also at:

<http://skeptic.org.uk/news/2009/1661>

'If you already subscribe to *The Skeptic* you should receive the relaunch issue of the magazine very shortly. Inside the issue is an interview conducted with James Randi on Sunday 20th April 2008, the day after his first presentation to a British audience in over a decade. Randi kindly allowed our small group into his Vauxhall hotel room, where we filmed the interview prior to his departure to visit the Magic Circle. He was a very gracious and accommodating host. In the 52 minute interview, Randi discusses his Canadian education, walking out of an English Literature exam, truancy, magic and his 22 jailbreaks, Uri Geller, Project Alpha and fooling scientists, exposing Peter Popoff and miracle healing, thinking critically and independently, mortality, heart bypass surgery and medical science.

'The resulting film has now been released to accompany the print version of the interview. It forms part of the Media Archive but has been split into six parts, starting here (from <http://youtube.com/theskepticmag>).

'Please comment, subscribe and circulate this as widely as possible. Most of all, enjoy.'

### Homoeopathy

From Dr Leonor Sierra, Scientific Liaison, Sense About Science:

'In June Voice of Young Science joined with other early career medics and researchers in Africa and wrote an open letter to the WHO, calling on the body to condemn the promotion of homeopathy for treating HIV, malaria, TB, infant diarrhoea and influenza.

'The WHO has responded and said that it DOES NOT recommend the use of homeopathy for treating HIV, TB, malaria, influenza and infant diarrhoea. The office of Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of WHO, stated on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2009 that these responses "clearly express the WHO's position".

Today the Voice of Young Science network, has [written to the health ministers](#) of all countries to publicise the WHO's position, asking them to combat the promotion of homeopathy for these dangerous diseases. The story can be found on the BBC website: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8211925.stm> and at: <http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/331/>.

'We think is a fantastic step forward, creating an authoritative reference point for those of us who are battling these ludicrous claims in the field and trying to ensure good health care. It is only as a big step as we can make it and we want to ensure it doesn't get buried. Already many people are writing to their regional healthcare practices in Africa, alerting their local professional networks and putting up comments on blogs and news website.

'Can you help? Will you send it to people you know? Can you alert any contacts in health care, health policy and health reporting? Can you write an article for your professional society, write something on your blog or post it onto a public forum?'

Also see the following website for comments on the WHO announcement: <http://skeptical.wordpress.com/2009/08/21/who-needs-to-grow-a-pair/>

From Hrasco Gabor:

'Please check the current issue of Homeopathy 4 Everyone: <http://www.hpathy.com/ezine/2009aug.asp>

'There are a number of really scary articles.'

### **False claims for probiotics**

See:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2009/jul/25/probiotic-health-benefits> for an article on probiotics by Felicity Lawrence (author of *Eat Your Heart Out: Why the Food Business is Bad for the Planet and Your Health*, Penguin).

### **The peer review process**

From Dr Leonor Sierra, Scientific Liaison, Sense About Science:

'Should peer review detect fraud and misconduct? What does it do for science and what does the scientific community want it to do? Will it illuminate good ideas or shut them down? Should reviewers remain anonymous? These were some of the questions of the Sense About Science Peer Review Survey 2009, the largest ever international surveys of authors and reviewers. The preliminary findings have now been released and can be found at: <http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/395>. The full results will be released later in the year.

'The findings were presented in the session "Science Fact or Science Fiction: Should Peer Review Stop Plagiarism, Bias or Fraud?" at the British Science Festival, where Tracey Brown of Science About Science, David Adam of *The Guardian* and Peter Hayward of *Lancet Infectious Diseases* debated the challenges of publishing research. We will shortly put up a recording of the session for those that couldn't make it.

'Can you help us? Will you send it to people you know in publishing or anyone that could be interested in seeing the results? Can you write an article for your professional society or write something on your blog? Several of the articles below allow you to post comments, so do share your thoughts.

'Also have a look at some of the coverage of the survey and the session:

**The Times Online:** [A review of peer review](#)

**Times Higher Education:** [Peer Reviewers satisfied with the system](#)

**Nature blogs:** [Peer review reviewed](#)

**Chemistry World:** [Peer review under the microscope](#)

**Information World Review:**

[Researchers show loyalty to peer review but want a lot more from it](#)

**Physics World blog:** [And the survey say...](#)

**BBC World Service:** Listen to an interview with Tracey Brown about the survey here (about 20 mins into the programme):

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0044sjq>.'

### **British False Memory Society**

'The latest BFMS newsletter, Volume 17, No. 1, is now available on our website and can be accessed by clicking on the following link:-

[http://www.bfms.org.uk/Text\\_Assets/2009\\_July\\_Newsletter.pdf](http://www.bfms.org.uk/Text_Assets/2009_July_Newsletter.pdf)

'In this edition we are fortunate once again to have an article written by Professor Chris French, a BFMS Advisory Board member, who makes the point that the false memory controversy is not 'yesterday's news'. Chris has a new regular column on the Guardian Online science pages: (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/apr/07/sexual-abuse-false-memory-syndrome>)

and this, his second article, sparked off a huge "forum debate".

'We also have a very honest account from a sibling of an accuser detailing how she handles life as "the other daughter". The Legal section includes the case of a South West taxi driver who has been told by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority that he can proceed with his claim for mental damage and financial loss as a result of being falsely accused.

'We always welcome your feedback. If you have any comments or contributions to make regarding the newsletter please email us.'

Donna Kelly, Administrator  
BFMS

Bradford on Avon  
Wiltshire BA15 1NF  
Tel: 01225 868682

### **UK Skeptics Newsletter**

Hello, from UK-Skeptics at: [www.ukskeptics.com](http://www.ukskeptics.com).

The second edition of our newsletter is now available:

<http://ukskeptics.com/newsletters/2009-2.pdf>

It is also available from the website: <http://www.ukskeptics.com/newsletters.php>

Again, we have news, articles, commentary and a competition. There

are articles on magnetic fields and haunting experiences, understanding skepticism, an interview with UFO expert Nick Pope, and a new feature looking at skepticism and historical claims and understanding.

### From Jon Donni of BadPsychics.

Subject: Righteous Indignation:

<http://www.facebook.com//;http://badpsychics.co.uk/thefraudfiles/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1009>

‘Hi, just letting you know about our latest podcast. “Righteous Indignation” is the podcast that aims to critically examine extraordinary claims and the people who surround them. These include ideas related to conspiracy, the paranormal, the supernatural and attempts to redefine the boundaries of science and understanding.

‘Please leave any comments, suggestions, opinions or questions in the

thread or email us if you prefer: [info@ripodcast.co.uk](mailto:info@ripodcast.co.uk).’

### From Alex Pryce of the Edinburgh Skeptics

‘After about two months I’ve finally written another blog. Might prove controversial to some hardened skeptics out there :

<http://edinburghskeptics.wordpress.com/2009/07/10/skeptical-snobbishness/>

‘Please note, it isn’t a comment on any single skeptic. If you recognise something you may have said, it’s only there because others have made the same comment!’

### From ‘Shivanka’

‘I’m a web designer and this is my site.

<http://unexplainmysteries.blogspot.com/>

Hope this will be useful to you.

Kind regards

### Is a mermaid living under the sea in northern Israel?

<http://haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1107034.html>

‘Some residents of Kiryat Yam are convinced the city is home to a mermaid, and the town’s local council is offering \$1 million to anyone who can prove the aquatic damsel exists. Over recent months, dozens of people in the Haifa suburb have reported seeing a creature that resembles a young girl leaping out of the water and doing aerial tricks across the waves before disappearing to her home under the sea.

‘The story has caused quite a splash in Kiryat Yam, with dozens of onlookers flocking to the town’s beach at sunset, cameras in tow, to catch a glimpse of the mermaid and hopefully, the million dollar photo.’

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answer is as follows:

I’m not sure if my approach to this paradox is the right one, but here goes.

There isn’t really a mystery because *all* numbers, odd or even, have a chance of being the product of two whole numbers chosen at random.

However, if you keep repeating the exercise you should find that you get more *repetitions* of even numbers than odd products. This is because any given even number is more likely than not to be the product of more two-divisor combinations than any odd number. For instance, half of all numbers divisible by 2 are also divisible by 4 (if they are the

product of two even numbers). So, for example, 12 is the product of both 2 and 6 *and* 4 and 3. (For the pedants, the argument doesn’t work for the numbers 4 and 8.)

Also, all prime numbers are odd except for 2 and, unlike non-primes, the only chance of any prime number being the product of the two chosen numbers is if one of the numbers is 1 and the other is the prime number itself. (I think consideration of numbers that are the product of two primes comes into this line of argument as well.)

If my thinking is on the right lines then doesn’t it follow that if you disallow repetitions of the same product the odd-even inequality disappears?

I welcome any assistance with this puzzle.

Incidentally, there are simple proofs for Ivan’s assertions about the sums and products of even and odd numbers. Any even number can be represented as  $2x$ , where  $x$  is a whole number, and any odd number (except 1) by  $2x+1$ . The rest is simple algebra.

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## POSTSCRIPT

### Things you'll never hear

1. 'Well, thank you ever so much for your experiment demonstrating that the paranormal powers I thought I had have a better explanation. I'm really grateful and from now on I won't be claiming to have these powers at all.'
2. 'Well, thank you ever so much for your experiment demonstrating that my theory is incorrect and the other theory is better. I'm really grateful and from now on I won't be supporting my theory at all.'

### About ASKE

ASKE is a society for people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly newsletter and we have an annual magazine, the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email [m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)

Please note the new ASKE P.O. Box number and address

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website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>