
Skeptical Adversaria

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

I have started a new regular feature in the newsletter called ‘Medicine on the Fringe’, paralleling Mark Newbrook’s ‘Language on the Fringe’. The idea is to report on recent events of relevance to that subject.

However, I would be very happy to hand this over to someone else (I am not medically qualified). It is only intended to be one page and it is not intended to be an original contribution to the subject (although it can be). Any offers?

Likewise would anyone like to start to start an ‘On the Fringe’ feature in their own area of expertise?

Report on the UK Government’s Funding of Homeopathy

On February 20th 2010 the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee published a report¹ on the use of National Health Service (NHS) money to provide patients with homeopathic treatment.

The committee received around 60 written submissions, which are in the report. They include those of critics, such as Edzard Ernst and Ben Goldacre, and supporters of homeopathy, including Peter Fisher of the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital.

The committee’s main conclusions are as follows. The Government should stop allowing the funding of homeopathy on the NHS; the funding of

¹ To access the report visit the website <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmsctech.htm>>. Click on the link for the report on NHS funding for homeopathic treatment.

homeopathic hospitals should not continue; and NHS doctors should not refer patients to homeopaths.

The Government normally responds to the committee’s findings within 2 months of a report, but there is uncertainty at present as a general election is imminent.

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**KEEP LIBEL LAWS
OUT OF SCIENCE**

(<http://www.libelreform.org/>)

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/mar/01/simon-singh-libel-case-chiropractors> for news on the Simon Singh libel case)

Former Speaker of the House of Commons, Lord Martin, has tabled a ‘motion of regret’ in the House of Lords, seeking more time to debate Government plans to change the rules on fees in libel actions. If his attempt succeeds there may be no time for the debate before Parliament is dissolved for the general election and the reform package will be lost.

Lord Martin resigned as Speaker in May 2009, the first holder of the post to be forced from office for 300 years. In 2007, it was disclosed that he had spent more than £21,000 of taxpayers’ money on libel lawyers to defend his

Contents

From the ASKE Chair	1
Logic and Intuition	2
Medicine on the Fringe	2
Language on the Fringe	3
From the Bookshelf	7
Of Interest	10
Upcoming Events	11
Logic and Intuition: Answer	12
About ASKE	12

personal reputation. He also used £150,000 of taxpayers’ money in a 4-year High Court legal battle in an attempt to block the publication of MPs’ expenses under the Freedom of Information Act.

Meanwhile up to 95,000 descendants of the prophet Muhammad are planning to bring a libel action in the UK over the ‘blasphemous’ cartoons of the founder of Islam published in the Danish press, on the grounds that that the cartoons were accessible in the UK on the Internet.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

Here's yet another problem involving probability. The answers are a little counter-intuitive, but like many such problems the solution requires only the most basic knowledge of mathematics and has more to do with the application of simple logic.

I am playing a game of dice with Stefan and Marie. I repeatedly roll a standard dice (or die if you prefer) and if the number that comes up is even I give Stefan a pound, otherwise he gives me a pound. If the number is divisible by three I give Marie a pound, otherwise she gives me a pound. Can you work out the answers to the following questions?

1. Suppose, having rolled the dice, I announce, 'Stefan, you win one pound'. What has now happened to Marie's chances of winning?

2. If I announce, 'Marie, you win one pound', what has happened to Stefan's chances of winning?

3. If I announce, 'Sorry Stefan, you have lost' what has happened to Marie's chances of winning?

4. If I announce, 'Sorry Marie, you have lost' what has happened to Stefan's chances of winning?

5. In the long run who is likely to make the most money from this game?

Answer on page 12

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

The two major events on the fringe medical scene, namely developments in the Simon Singh libel case with the British Chiropractic Association and the report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology on NHS funding of homeopathic medicine, are noted in the Editorial.

Homeopathic claims for cancer

A recent paper has been held by supporters of homeopathic treatment to demonstrate its efficacy for cancer: Frenkel, M. et al: Cytotoxic effects of ultra-diluted remedies on breast cancer cells. *International Journal of Oncology*, Feb 2010, **36**(2), 395-403.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20043074>

However there has been a very critical response:

<http://scepticsbook.com/2010/02/14/a-giant-leap-in-logic-from-a-piece-of-bad-science/>

http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2010/03/a_homeopathic_bit_of_breast_cancer_sciencen.php

Food allergy and intolerance

Too many people are self-diagnosing food allergies and could be restricting their diet unnecessarily, according to a report in January 2010 by the University

of Portsmouth and commissioned by the Flour Advisory Bureau (*note 1*).

Research shows that up to 20 per cent of adults think they suffer from food allergy or food intolerance. However evidence suggests that the real prevalence in adults is less than 2 per cent. This means that millions of people could be avoiding certain foods unnecessarily and without proper medical advice.

The report also suggests that over half of the British population believes that wheat allergy is a common illness and in 2009 wheat was the most commonly self-reported food allergen for both men and women. However, wheat allergy is less common than other food allergies such as nuts, eggs and milk.

The *Sunday Times* also reported on 21.2.10 (*note 2*) the experiences of a 'healthy' undercover reporter who consulted seven 'experts' in food allergy, including one working at a Holland & Barrett outlet and another practising 'kinesiology'. She was given a variety of tests and received conflicting advice about her being allergic to, or intolerant of, a wide range of foodstuffs. A consultant at Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital in London found she was allergy free.

'Locked in syndrome' man is *not* communicating by keyboard

Put the name Rom Houben in your search engine and you will discover the remarkable story of this 46-year-old Belgian man who was believed to have been unconscious for 23 years as a result of a serious car crash in 1983. In 2006 brain scanning techniques revealed that the correct diagnosis was locked-in syndrome, a condition in which the patient is aware and awake, but cannot move or communicate owing to complete paralysis of nearly all voluntary muscles in the body.

In November 2009 the international media carried dramatic stories describing how Mr Houben was able to communicate using a keyboard and computer screen while his hand was supported by a speech therapist. The method used is known as 'facilitated communication' and has been debunked in the sceptical literature and elsewhere as an example of the 'ideomotor effect' operating on the facilitator. Access any of the several online video recordings of Mr Houben allegedly communicating by this method and you will see that his finger flits rapidly around the keyboard, typing out whole sentences of lucid prose. Yet, whereas the facilitator's eyes

are glued to the keyboard and screen, Mr Houben, for most of the time, is looking away and often has his eyes closed. Read viewers' comments underneath and you will probably agree that it is the facilitator who appears to be communicating the messages. Yet one of Mr Houben's doctors claims that tests have indicated that Mr Houben has communicated information unknown to the facilitator (by naming objects that had been brought into the room in her absence).

Here is some of what Mr Houben seemingly had to say about his ordeal. 'Someone had thrown away the key forever. In the eyes of the world I was a sporty young man who had suddenly become a vegetable. I was lying there but was I really there? Well, I was there day in, day out. I heard, I saw, I felt, but

only deep inside, hidden from everyone, but not from myself. Now I can communicate and talk via facilitated communication. Not everyone believes in this form of communication. It is a controversial method but, for me, it is vital to life. At last, my views can be heard and my feelings expressed.'

According to the facilitator, Linda Wouters, 'He says, "I am blessed. It is difficult to imagine it. I know he feels it and I know what he means when he says it but it is still difficult to imagine it.' And his family have announced that he is writing a book about his life in hospital all of those years.

Sadly and inevitably, more stringent tests have now revealed what most people suspected all along (*note 3*). Mr Houben is not the person whom we should credit with this moving account

of the horrors of enduring years of complete paralysis with everyone believing that you are totally unaware of what is going on when in fact you are conscious. The author of this story is Mrs Wouter herself.

Notes

1. 'Wheat Hypersensitivity Report' by Heather Mackenzie and Carina Venter, School of Health Sciences & Social Work, University of Portsmouth <<http://www.port.ac.uk/aboutus/newsandevents/frontpagenews/title,107159.en.html>>
2. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/article7034867.ece>
3. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8526017.stm>>

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Gavin Menzies' (mis-)use of linguistics

In his books *1421* and *1434*, Gavin Menzies has promoted the idea that Chinese navigators explored much of the globe in the 15th Century, leaving ample evidence – including linguistic evidence – which has been ignored by mainstream historians. His views have achieved considerable popular success (partly because of his adroit self-promotion) but have not found favour in the scholarly world. Menzies regards his academic critics as ill-informed, biased and even mentally ill, and refuses to engage in exchanges with them (he rejected my own attempts at dialogue).

Menzies' linguistic material in *1421* is mainly located in his 'Appendix 1' (pp 494-595), from which all but a few of the examples cited below are drawn. (All page references are to the 2003 Bantam paperback edition, ISBN 0 553 81522 9.) For the most part, the treatment of each claim given in the appendix is very brief indeed. Many of the sources are badly dated and reflect

ideas which have long been superseded. In some cases, e.g. the list of items on p 518, no source is provided.

The problems with Menzies' linguistic material include the following:

1. Menzies' philological methods are covert, but his equations of Chinese and non-Chinese words suggest strongly that they are typical of the amateur fringe (and similar to those which were used by scholars too before the subject had been properly investigated). Such methods involve the unjustifiable assumption that unsystematically and/or loosely similar forms with similar (or allegedly connected) meanings, in languages not necessarily known to be related 'genetically' or to have been in contact at relevant dates, are probably connected – either because the languages are in fact 'genetically' related, or (in the vast majority of the cases adduced by Menzies) because of influential contact between their speakers (linguistic transfer or 'borrowing') - in this instance, the influence of Chinese upon other languages. It is imagined that such

pairs/sets of similar forms can thus be used to strengthen an argument to the effect that the **cultures** in question were connected in either of these two ways.

However: there are millions of words and word-parts in thousands of languages, and there are only so many common sounds and sound combinations. Superficial similarity between words and/or word-parts taken from different languages, especially short ones, is in itself no evidence of a genuine connection, even if the meanings are similar. If the meanings are **not** especially similar, or are merely alleged to be related as part of some theory, the case is even weaker. The upshot of this is that the onus has to lie upon those who present novel etymologies or claims about cognatehood (shared origin) to show that there is at least a good case. (Indeed, for recent times where hard evidence is plentiful, there are very many superficially similar forms, often with similar meanings and/or in related languages, which are nevertheless

demonstrably unconnected and only accidentally similar.)

In the course of 200 years of intensive study, linguists have learned much about the strength of evidence that is required to demonstrate (probable) connectedness between such forms. The main issue is that of systematicity; language change is very largely systematic. It is almost universally agreed that sets of unsystematically similar forms with similar meanings are not at all likely to be cognates, and there is certainly no reason to regard them as demonstrably cognate. This constraint applies most strongly in cases of alleged 'genetic' relationship, but it still applies to cases of alleged contact as well.

Anyone who wishes to overturn these points needs to develop arguments to the effect that the scholarly tradition of historical linguistics is mistaken in these respects. Menzies makes no attempt to do this, or to justify his linguistic equations within this constraint established by the tradition.

Another issue here involves known or very well-grounded established etymologies for words, involving the histories of the relevant language families. Proposers of alternative etymologies need to argue that these are more plausible than the established ones.

Any major loosening of the standards of evidence for cognatehood, which sets of claims such as Menzies' require, would have the consequence that very many alternative proposals (involving e.g. a whole range of different languages of origin for the same words) would be roughly equally plausible. But these proposals all contradict each other; only one of them, if any, could be correct. (In that event, the reasonable conclusion would probably be that we could not say much at all about philology or older etymologies with any confidence. Orthodox linguists would regard this conclusion as a last resort and as not warranted by the actual evidence.)

Like most non-linguists who advance such theories, Menzies concerns himself only with vocabulary, saying nothing

about phonological or grammatical similarities/differences between Chinese and the non-Chinese languages in question. Since his claims involve contact rather than 'genetic' relatedness, this omission is less serious than it would be if the latter were at stake; but his total failure to deal with these aspects of the languages remains potentially problematic.

Examples of Menzies' philological conclusions follow. All of them involve unsystematic and/or phonetically loose similarities, and in some cases (e.g. the list of items on p 518) much of the information needed for assessment is in fact missing. In a few cases, no actual forms at all are cited.

- Ninety-five allegedly Chinese words and 130 allegedly Chinese placenames (not intelligible as Aymara, Quechua etc.) in northern Peru (pp 517-518); 15 of these words are listed on p 518 (as noted, without any reference), but the actual forms of the allegedly connected Chinese words are not themselves provided for comparison with the Peruvian words, only their meanings are given – and the alleged relevance of these meanings is not made apparent, since no descriptions of the locations are offered.
- Country names *Peru* and *Chile* interpreted as Chinese (pp 517, 565); the meanings of the allegedly connected Chinese words are only very loosely relevant.
- Fifteen further words/phrases involving allegedly significant similarities between Chinese and non-Asian languages (or in some cases between Asian languages other than Chinese and non-Asian languages, with the relevance to Chinese being left unexplicated), with an unexpanded reference to the existence of at least 36 more (and an abrupt reference to the genuinely interesting case of Polynesian *kumara/umara* ('sweet potato') and phonetically similar words in

Peruvian languages referring to this vegetable, which clearly did spread across the Pacific in pre-modern times in **some** manner, though there seems no reason to posit **Chinese** involvement) (pp 518-519); the source for one of the 15 items is the fringe writer Henrietta Mertz, and some items are again unreferenced.

- Reference to Nancy Yaw Davis' near-fringe methodologically unsound claims regarding significant similarities between Zuni and Japanese (p 518; see also 2) below); again, the relevance to Chinese is left unexplicated, and in this case specific words are not mentioned.
- Reference to Columbus' reported meeting with people calling themselves *Yin*, identified as the Chinese word for 'India' (p 553); similarity between such short word-forms is of no significance, since, as noted, it could very readily arise by chance.
- Claim (presumably associated with the foregoing) that the word *Inuit* derives from *Yin Uit* ('Chinese' for 'people from India'), attributed (like some other such points) to Martin Tai (p 558).
- Unreferenced claim that the Inca ruler-name *Atahuallpa* is a Chinese word for 'chicken' (p 563).
- Claim (again attributed to Martin Tai) that the name *Inca* itself involves the Chinese word *yin* (p 565).

Menzies also makes some extremely vague references to 'American Indian names that are Chinese' (p 519), to linguistic similarities between Aboriginal languages and Japanese (p 525; no reference; relevance, again?), to 'language' in the context of alleged Chinese cultural exports to California (p 546), to linguistic similarities between Peru and China (p 564), and to 'Chinese linguistics' (a very odd term in context!) on Niue (p 574).

In none of these cases is there any reference in Menzies' text to current

mainstream linguistic scholarship. The languages in question have been researched adequately or better, and if any such cases had any empirical justification they would be so sensational as to require discussion.

2. Menzies adduces some cases involving the allegedly surprising use of written Chinese or other (semi-)relevant languages in areas remote from Chinese influence as understood by scholars, or of other Asian languages found written in areas remote from East Asia. Some of these cases (eg that of the ‘Tamil Bell’ found in New Zealand; see pp 210-212, 517) are genuinely interesting but are not evidence of Chinese activity as posited by Menzies. Others, e.g. the alleged Mongolian inscription on Dighton Rock in Massachusetts (p 555) or the alleged Chinese and Mongolian inscriptions on the wall of a temple in Mexico (p 562), would clearly be relevant (and very dramatic) if verified but are not in fact accepted as accurate by any qualified scholar. Still others relate to events so remote in time and involving such perishable materials that they very probably could not now be tested (e.g. the claim on p 563 that the Spanish conquistadores found Mongolian script used on paper in Mexico, or the claims on p 564 that Chinese script was found on pots and mummy-cases in early colonial Peru). Yet others are too vague to be of use to Menzies. There is no reason to suppose that an unintelligible inscription allegedly found (when?) in the Azores by the Portuguese (p 561) was in Chinese (or in any other relevant language).

3. Menzies adduces various cases allegedly demonstrating the surprising use of spoken Chinese in areas normally regarded as remote from Chinese influence, or the surprising mutual intelligibility of Chinese and a range of non-Asian languages. Examples:

- Two Chinese-speaking/understanding villages in Peru (pp 514, 517, 564; allegedly, the inhabitants of these two villages do **not**

understand **each others’** local ‘dialects’!).

- Chinese-speaking location in California (p 517).
- 20th Century Navajo-speakers understanding Chinese (pp 559-560).
- Zuni-speakers understanding Japanese (p 559); Davis again and associates (relevance?).

In none of these cases is there any reference to current mainstream linguistic scholarship. Again, the languages in question have been researched adequately or better, and if any such cases had any empirical justification they would be so sensational as to require discussion. Many of these cases were reported so long ago that they could not now be disconfirmed; negative findings today could be met with the rejoinder that matters are now different.

Covey himself thinks, bizarrely, that it is up to the linguistics establishment to test such claims, otherwise, they should apparently be regarded as reliable.

In respect of mutual intelligibility: some ‘epigraphist’ writers such as Cyclone Covey (a supporter of the late Barry Fell) have recently endorsed cases of this kind in support of other extreme diffusionist linguistic claims relating to alleged pre-Columbian transatlantic or transpacific voyages. Covey’s leading case involves one of the languages mentioned in this context by Menzies: early-mid 20th Century Navajo. This time, though, the other language involved is not Chinese but Uighur (Turkestan). Covey believes (with Ethel Stewart and others) that some (non-Inuit) Amerindian groups such as the Navajo actually left Central Asia only in the last 1,000-3,000 years. The Navajo migrated in medieval times, fleeing the Mongols. Their language is therefore still close to the Uighur spoken by those

who remained in Asia. Obviously, **either** Menzies (and his source John Ting) **or** Covey must be wrong, as Uighur and Chinese are not similar; very probably, **both** are wrong, as Navajo is very unlike both Uighur and Chinese.

Fringe works down the years (especially older works) have reported many other such incidents – Irish Gaelic understood by Mexican Amerindians, Latvian by Tatars, Welsh by speakers of Mandan in the American Mid-West, etc, etc – but (not surprisingly) the accounts are anecdotal only and actual evidence is never forthcoming. Most such reports are clearly apocryphal. (Even Breton and Welsh, closely related P-Celtic languages for which such claims are made, are not now mutually intelligible apart from the odd phrase.)

Covey himself thinks, bizarrely, that it is up to the linguistics establishment to test such claims, otherwise, they should apparently be regarded as reliable. (In any case, negative findings on the Navajo-Uighur case, obtained today, would be countered by Covey’s claim – made in correspondence with me – that matters are now different.)

4. In his linguistic equations, Menzies typically does not identify the **type** of spoken Chinese in question. Because Mandarin and the various *fangyan* (‘dialects’) such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew etc. spoken around China have rather divergent phonologies and partly separate lexical phonologies, there are usually major phonetic and phonological differences between the various spoken forms of any given Chinese word written throughout China with the same character and regarded by the Chinese as the same word with the same meaning. Phonological **change** in Chinese (of any type) over the centuries (even recent centuries) is also potentially a factor. Menzies ignores all this complexity, citing forms simply as ‘Chinese’. This potentially allows him considerable freedom in looking for a ‘Chinese’ word displaying (often loose) phonetic similarity with a given non-Chinese word.

5. Some of the ‘Chinese’ words cited have unlikely phonological forms. Most notably, none of the major *fangyan*, nor indeed Mandarin, possess words terminating in /-l/; but Menzies cites the form *tsil* (‘wet’) (pp 518, 557) as a source for a word spelled identically in roman script and attributed to the Squamish of British Columbia. He is under a clear obligation to identify the varieties of Chinese in which he claims such forms occur.

6. Menzies’ other linguistic statements are sometimes inaccurate. One involves another case of loose research methodology; it relates to Menzies’ means of ‘identifying’ the script on stones found in the Cape Verde Islands and in the Congo (pp 134-136). Menzies thought that it ‘looked Indian’, but rather than take the obvious route of consulting a university linguistics or Indology department he asked the Bank of India. Their employee advised him that it ‘look[ed] like Malayalam’, and on further enquiry told him that this **was** (my emphasis) the language of Kerala. That is correct, but Malayalam is far from dead, as *was* might imply; it still has many millions of speakers in India and in a substantial diaspora. And, whether the information about Malayalam was wholly accurate or not, Menzies could readily have found experts in the language; as things actually are, he could readily have found literate native speakers as well. This is not as bad as Erich von Daniken’s disgracefully lazy decision to quote *Exodus* from memory in print rather than looking up the relevant passage – but it is not **much** better! (Even if Malayalam is involved here, of course, that is not itself evidence of Chinese activity as posited by Menzies.)

Menzies’ further linguistic errors include the claim that Haida and Aleut are the same language (p 558).

Menzies thus shows repeatedly that he cannot be relied upon as a thinker or theoriser where language is concerned. This finding may serve to lessen whatever confidence readers may have

had in his work considered more generally.

Glozel resurfacing!

(Also forthcoming in *ASSAP News* **128**, Winter 2009-10, p 11; see Note)

During the 20th Century, an allegedly mysterious archaeological site at Glozel in France received much intermittent attention. It was originally promoted by local ‘discoverers’ in the 1920s, and despite determined debunking (notably in the pages of *Antiquity*) it continued to ‘rear its head’, especially when thermo-luminescence dating suggested that it was genuinely ancient. Now it has resurfaced again. Lionel and Patricia Fanthorpe have recently commented on Glozel in ASSAP’s newsletter, focusing on the script (if so it be) found on tablets associated with the site.

It remains the case that most scholars who have examined the case of Glozel are far from persuaded

However, it remains the case that most scholars who have examined the case of Glozel are far from persuaded that the site itself is genuinely ancient. The finds are altogether unlike anything genuine unearthed in the area, and it is not surprising that ‘forgery/salting’ (the concoction of an archaeological site with fake objects) was rapidly proposed as an explanation. Now it is difficult at this remove to be sure of people’s motives, and I am not myself convinced that those who first reported the site were fraudsters. None of the firm dates arrived at by thermo-luminescence or the various other tests which have been applied are themselves modern. But they do show a wide range; and even the early/middle part of the range, historically the **least** implausible section, implies an otherwise unknown mini-civilisation, with an otherwise unknown script and possibly an unknown language, in the middle of Celtic/Roman Gaul. This would be very strange, especially if the tablets themselves **were**

somehow genuine (see below). So maybe the site **was** salted (by persons unidentified) but with old materials (?).

On the linguistic side of the case, specifically: the Fanthorpes refer to the supposed Glozel script as an ‘alphabet’. This would imply that it has approximately one symbol per speech sound. But an undeciphered ‘script’ such as this might instead be a syllabary (one symbol per syllable, as in Japanese kana) or a logography (one symbol per word/stem, as in Chinese); and there are yet further possibilities. There are statistical tests which can provide some indication of script-type: e.g., the ratio of tokens to types (much higher for an alphabet with its small number of symbols than for a logography), typical text-length, complexity of symbols (alphabetic characters tend to be simpler than logograms), sheer total number of different symbols, etc. The total number of sign-types is over 130, which virtually excludes an alphabetic analysis. But in fact the more sophisticated tests of this kind which have been applied to the Glozel ‘script’ (chiefly by the linguist Crawford) suggest that the ‘texts’ are not linguistic at all. For instance, the fact that 34 of the 130+ distinct signs occur only once each is highly suspect; such patterns are vanishingly rare, in syllabaries (where the distribution of signs is usually much more even) and in logographies (where rare words are seldom so thick on the ground). This suggests that the system is either a fake produced by someone unaware of these considerations, or, if genuine, not a script as such (i.e. it does not represent any language).

My main general point is thus that on current evidence one should not **assume** that the site, specific artefacts or, especially, the tablets are genuinely old.

Note

ASSAP is the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena. We are grateful to ASSAP for permission to reproduce this article here.

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

The Rise & Fall of Atlantis and the Mysterious Origins of Human Civilization by J.S. Gordon. London: Watkins, 2009 (pp xxix + 354).

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Gordon is an ‘alternative historian’ who holds that the sober accounts of ancient history presented by mainstream scholarship are largely false. His focus is upon Atlantis, the ‘sunken island/continent’ which was apparently invented by Plato as a literary device (the central feature of a moral tale) and represented by him as Egyptian in origin for the purpose of verisimilitude. The story as presented by Plato finds no empirical support and is regarded as plausible only on the fringe. Further, Gordon links his ideas about Atlantis as a real entity with arguments in support of the currently ‘trendy’ theory of the universe as pervaded by consciousness, regarded here as a rival to three other views which he rejects: mainstream scientific evolutionary theory, Judaeo-Christian-Muslim creationism, and the fringe view that ‘ancient astronauts’ provided major early input to the development of *homo sapiens*.

Gordon’s work is not altogether without interest; but it is vitiated by a number of features common in such books, including: (a) seriously inadequate referencing of quasi-factual claims (which obviously obstructs assessment); (b) loose and over-

simplified argumentation (frequently the validity of one of his claims, if itself granted, would render a further more dramatic position **arguable** but no more than arguable and would by no means demonstrate that it was **true** – as Gordon repeatedly suggests); (c) acceptance of highly dubious earlier fringe sources (notably Blavatsky and the modern proponents of Vedantic ideas about long time-depths for *homo sapiens*); (d) overstated criticisms of mainstream ideas (e.g. (post-)Darwinian approaches to evolution); (e) sheer errors of fact and usage (e.g. acceptance of the theory of Egyptian ‘mystery religions’, now debunked; references to unrecorded trips to Egypt allegedly undertaken by Plato; a badly non-standard and thus confusing definition of the term *scientism*); etc.

My own main area of expertise is linguistics, and in this area Gordon displays vast confusion and advances/accepts some very poorly-grounded ideas. For instance: (i) he repeatedly discusses key linguistic matters in an impossibly vague manner; (ii) he fatally confuses linguistic levels (pronunciation and grammar) in using key terms such as *agglutinative*; (iii) he

relies upon earlier non-standard thinkers whose ideas have not been judged plausible, and even upon ill-informed and dated sources such as Blavatsky; (iv) he proposes wildly implausible and unsupported scenarios involving the development of languages and scripts (intended to replace well-established mainstream ideas about these matters); (v) he largely ignores the two hundred years of scientific historical linguistic scholarship and thus employs the usual loose, utterly unreliable fringe philological/etymological methods; etc.

In any learned discipline, advancing novel theories is pointless if one does not first acquire (or gain access to) a reasonable degree of expertise – if only to disagree rationally with well-supported positions that one now understands. Gordon has not achieved this, in linguistics in particular, and it does not appear that he has made a serious attempt to do so.

I suggest that the book cannot be taken seriously as it stands. With more effort on Gordon’s part, it is conceivable that it might have been somewhat more interesting..

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Counterknowledge: How we Surrendered to Conspiracy Theories, Quack Medicine, Bogus Science and Fake History by Damian Thompson, London: Atlantic Books, 2008, (pp 182). ISBN 1843546760

Reviewed by Steve Dulson

Not all of us Damian, not all of us. But the point is well made in this excellent little book. The writing is clear and concise and examines each of its chosen topics from a layman’s point of view. This is not a book for those who wish to explore the specific and exhaustive details of each subject under scrutiny but it is very readable and the references are such that you are encouraged to do so.

By way of definition: ‘The essence of counter-knowledge is that it purports to be knowledge but it is *not* knowledge. Its claims can be shown to be untrue, either because there are facts that contradict them or because there is no evidence to support them. It misrepresents reality...by presenting non-facts as facts.’

The book is divided into six chapters, concentrating on such topics as creationism, pseudo-history, fake medicine and the concept of counter-knowledge as an ‘industry’ in itself. It concludes with some optimistic views on how we can live with and counteract counter-knowledge. Thompson illustrates the subject with numerous examples of commonly held

misconceptions, some of which would be laughable if the consequences of believing them were not so serious: families ruined through accusations of ritualistic ‘satanic’ abuse, exacerbation of AIDS in countries that actively *prevent* proper treatment (owing to the powerful influence of the prevailing religious proclamations on the issue), the MMR vaccine debacle... The list goes on.

There are useful comments on why a lot of people have a tendency to believe weird and wonderful theories, often for no better reason than that they fit in nicely with their world view (or help to justify that view to themselves). Regular viewers of the excellent BBC television series ‘*QI*’ will be only too familiar with the concept of how a small piece of misinformation can be created (sometimes by mistake but generally for political or propaganda reasons), and is then published or repeated so often that it eventually becomes regarded as stone cold fact by future generations. It is quite scary to think of some of the things that I assumed were obviously true from being taught them at school, only to discover that these ‘facts’ never actually were! So much ‘common knowledge’ is actually complete rubbish that has never been corrected, in the same way that sensational accusations and propaganda always hit page 1 but the retraction / correction just about sneaks into a tiny corner on page 94. Pseudo-history feeds off this fact, which is why even when hoaxes have been exposed, there is a real reticence by those who were taken in to acknowledge the fact and revise all of the subsequent theories which may have been built upon them. Some writers, researchers and preachers have too much invested in the myths upon which their work or whole belief systems are based, to be able to re-assess their stance or admit when they are proved to be wrong.

The book provides a good explanation of how and why the scientific method works and Thompson also comments on the way in which

those who employ scientific terminology to try to defend incredible notions (such as the concept of intelligent design) then fall back on standard get-outs when it is pointed out how the actual evidence blatantly disproves their ‘theory’. Even-handedly, he does explain how some people of faith have adapted the biblical interpretation of creation so that it can include concepts such as evolution (the two do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive if literalism can be abandoned). It is also interesting to learn how Islamic and Christian creationists are banding together to promote their anti-scientific views.

The author presents a handy get-out clause for serious religious debate early on though and states that it is difficult to debate religious belief in scientific terms because the two concepts are wholly incompatible. As for theology (and its close relative, astrology), well you would have thought that after being studied by so many scholars for so many thousands of years someone would have found some kind of *actual* evidence to support all the amazing claims by now. But no, those of a religious persuasion are still happy to rely on belief and faith in the face of honest enquiry from more rational thinkers. To me, terms such as ‘Christian Science’ or ‘Islamic Science’ do not actually mean anything; the second concept having no relation whatsoever with the first.

I find it annoying and amusing in equal measure when I see made-up science being promoted in television adverts in an attempt to wow the audience into thinking that some lotion or potion contains the elixir of eternal life but, as Thompson points out, it becomes a serious matter when you consider that the time, energy and expense being spent on all this snake oil and alternative medicine could actually be spent more usefully on...well, real medicine. Whilst the efficacy or otherwise of the placebo effect is a fascinating subject and it obviously makes sense for large pharmaceutical companies to keep us alive (but not

actually *cure* us of anything, of course - where is the profit in that?) I am not quite ready to submit to this quackery just yet. Thompson runs through a line-up of the main suspects in this respect and outlines the failings of each (for example, homeopathy amounts to drinking extremely expensive water). The fact that a small number of otherwise-respected universities unashamedly endorse degrees in such quackery as nutritional therapies must be a financial consideration rather than any serious learning opportunity that will lead to a *bona fide* qualification? The popularity of these myth-based treatments (read *beliefs*) is due to the fact that the pockets of the desperate are deep and wide and more easily opened, which explains why certain well-known chemists also stock and sell homeopathic remedies alongside real medicine. The idea that people can think themselves better is both insulting and dangerous.

‘It must be true, I read it on the Internet!’

Thompson describes how the counter-knowledge industry is driven by entrepreneurs preying on socially cultivated, fear-fuelled epidemics. He explains how the cultic milieu is propagated by ‘networkers’ who may be susceptible to one particularly weird idea or theory and then they discuss this with other individuals who may have a similar tendency but believe in a different phenomenon. Through cross-selling and reciprocal promotion, clients get passed around and these beliefs then propagate through the credulous like wildfire. One of the problems is that the outlandish opinions and speculative theories that are out there can now be peddled as fact at fibre-optic speed to all the net junkies who seem addicted to their next fix of fiction with no critical thinking being applied before publication. There simply is not time for an effective peer review process.

Sadly, persuasive people have always been able to convince less knowledgeable people of the truth

according to them. One of my favourite examples of this is a guy I know who managed to convince his girlfriend that cows become whiter as they become ready to be milked. I'm glad I wasn't there for the debrief / revelation on that one!

The final chapter gives some tips on how we can live with and combat counter-knowledge. It can be a struggle at times but we, particularly in the West, need to realise that non-judgementalism is a **bad** thing. Thompson speculates that because faith in such things as religion, politics and traditional social institutions have declined significantly

over the last 30 to 40 years, this fragmentation of Society and traditional authority structures has allowed New Age nonsense and mystical eastern beliefs to get a metaphorical foot in the door of our psyche. This has been further forced open and filled by entrepreneurial wish-fulfillers. In other words, the hangover from the 1960s has resulted in counter-culture becoming counter-knowledge.

The key to combating all of this nonsense is clearly having the courage and the freedom to speak up and expose obvious fiction and downright lies, even in the face of PC-shielded theories such

as the politically motivated, racial propaganda of the pseudo-historical theory of 'afrocentrism', the defence of which can descend into an Ali G style 'Is it cos I is black?' No, my friend, it is because you are demonstrably wrong.

Does all of this really matter? Well yes because what Terry Pratchett refers to as 'Lies to Children' can all too easily evolve into strongly held beliefs that people are prepared to die and, more importantly, kill for. As is intimated on the back cover, this book really should be on the reading list of every school child as part of the National Curriculum.

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Authors' comments on Jon Wainwright's review of *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion* by Michael A. Jawer (with Marc S. Micozzi) in the *Skeptical Adversaria*, Winter 2009 issue (Park Street Press/Inner Traditions, 2009).

Michael A. Jawer and Marc S. Micozzi, MD, PhD

As coauthors of *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion*, we were pleased that ASKE chose to review the book, and that Jon Wainwright stepped forward to do so. We wish, however, that his review did more to give readers a sense of the subject matter than merely exporting the phrase 'a scientific study of emotion'.

Given that our approach has been respectfully received by at least some skeptics here in the U.S. – and discomfited several psi enthusiasts – we'd hoped that its central premises might be examined in a more considered way. From reading Wainwright's review, for example, one would hardly realize that our book quotes Michael Shermer approvingly: 'There is no paranormal or supernatural; there are only the normal and the natural – and mysteries yet to be explained.' We believe there is much material here that will be intriguing to anyone drawn to the intricacies of personality, consciousness, and human nature.

In fact, *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion* puts forward a novel view – that perceptions heretofore considered anomalous can be illuminated through a close examination of the way feeling

works in the brain and the body. The book draws upon ample evidence gathered from the fast-developing field of psychoneuroimmunology that there is actually no mind/body divide: conscious and unconscious functioning, neural and hormonal systems, psyche and soma are merely different aspects of the unitary human being. We consider the self to be the amalgam of these different aspects (the shorthand term is 'bodymind'), and explore how nature and nurture may combine to produce highly sensitive people.

A considerable amount of data suggest that these sensitive individuals are the ones who report anomalous perceptions. The studies cited in several key chapters indicate that such people are not only more environmentally sensitive than the norm but also more physically and emotionally reactive, suggestible, fantasy prone and have a more 'thin-boundary' personality overall. Perhaps, the book proposes, such experiences are not paranormal but attributable to the particular constitutions of the people in question.

Closer scrutiny of these individuals could shed light on any number of issues

of interest to mainstream science: the relative contribution of genetics versus early life experience in creating the personality; the ways that biochemical messengers from various organs influence the brain; or the extent to which the dynamics of feeling bear upon thought, memory, and perception.

Wainwright could have done more to convey to the reader the terrain *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion* covers. Not many books tackling parapsychology are apt, for instance, to be in sync with one of the hottest topics around – the emerging discipline of embodied cognition.

In this sense, it is no rote defense of paranormal claims but a fresh and serious inquiry into the possible validity of perceptions that people have asserted in every culture and in every age and which, we argue, deserve scrutiny today based on what is known about the brain, the body, and the biology of emotion.

Would it not be remarkable if certain people are eventually demonstrated to have extra-sensitive forms of apprehension rather than capabilities that are somehow extra-sensory? The former are presumably within the means

of science to assess and understand. If such a contention holds appeal, please consider further investigation at our book's website:

www.emotiongateway.com.

We thank ASKE, newsletter editor Michael Heap, and reviewer Jon Wainwright for the opportunity to

correspond and the consideration they have afforded us.

OF INTEREST

Glasgow Skeptics in the Pub

BBC online news, March 9, 2010 features Glasgow Skeptics in the Pub. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/8544995.stm>

'Uri & Me' at the London Word Festival on 15th March

'An obsessive magic/comedy/spoken word show using Uri Geller as a frame to introduce skepticism to audiences who might never really think about the claims of clairvoyance, crystal pendulum dowsing and the like. The show also features the world's first ever psychic fork straightening.'

<http://www.londonwordfestival.com/?p=1627>

Veterinary CAM

Visit Neall Taylor's website <http://www.rationalvetmed.org/> and his blog, entitled 'VetCAM commonsense, at <http://aillas.blogspot.com/>. 'Also the British Veterinary Voodoo Society (<http://vetpath.co.uk/voodoo/>) is still going strong and still a hilarious antidote to the pompous outpourings of CAM scammers'.

The Flat Earth Society lives on!

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2010/feb/23/flat-earth-society>

US drug firm drops libel case against scientist

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/feb/18/ge-healthcare-henrik-thomsen-libel>

Neuro-linguistic programming for teachers

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/7229102/Teachers-get-lessons-in-body-language.html>

Charles the Daft

The Prince of Wales, a strong advocate of woo-woo medicine, dropped his energy ball while performing Chi Kung exercises at a demonstration of the 'Warrior Programme', aimed at helping ex-servicemen overcome emotional and mental problems after leaving the forces. Personal trainer Guy Ho asked the Prince to imagine he had a golden energy ball in the palm of his hand. 'The Prince was focused' said Mr Ho, but he dropped the ball twice - I had to find his energy ball. He had wonderful energy, you could really feel it'.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/theroyalfamily/7207352/Prince-of-Wales-struggles-to-master-ancient-Chinese-therapy.html>

Meanwhile, it is reported that the University of Exeter unit, headed by Edzard Ernst, Britain's first Professor of Complementary Medicine, could shut next year unless new finance can be found. It has upset CAM practitioners by questioning the evidence behind ideas such as homeopathy. Professor Ernst blames its uncertain future on a lack of support from his university when he clashed publicly with the Prince of Wales's Foundation for Integrated Health, which supports the use of homeopathy by the NHS.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/mar/03/edzard-ernst-complementary-medicine>

'Conversion cures' for homosexuality condemned

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/feb/09/conversion-therapy-homosexuality>

Homeopathy again

(More and more about less and less!)
10:23 Campaign (mass overdose of homeopathic medicine on 30.1.10)
<http://www.1023.org.uk/>

See also:

<http://bit.ly/4ZOmtd>
<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/edwes...ropaganda/>
<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style...75453.html>
<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/co...75454.html>

This last one was written by Martin Robbins of [Lay Science](#).

See also blogs [Boots the Alternative Chemist](#) and [The respectable face of homeopathy?](#)

Open University 'Perspectives on CAM' course

From Niall Taylor

'I've just completed the Open University "Perspectives on CAM" course. If anyone is interested in my final conclusions I have posted a rather lengthy essay in my little blog, here - <http://aillas.blogspot.com/>.

Head of bomb detector company arrested in fraud investigation

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/head-of-bomb-detector-company-arrested-in-fraud-investigation-1876388.html>

Hundreds of people have been killed in horrific bombings in Iraq after a British company supplied 'bogus' equipment which failed to detect explosive devices. The head of the company, which has made tens of millions of pounds from the sale of the detectors, has now been arrested and the British Government has announced a ban on their export to Iraq and Afghanistan. Specialists had

condemned them months ago as 'useless and dangerous'. The equipment, which operates on a 'dowsing' principle and has no electronic components, was also sold to Pakistan, Lebanon and Jordan, all countries suffering deaths and injuries through terrorist bomb attacks.

British False Memory Society

From Sue Ryder,

Administrator, BFMS

'The latest BFMS newsletter, Volume 17, No. 2, is now available on our website and can be accessed by clicking on the following link:-

http://www.bfms.org.uk/Text_Assets/2009DecemberNewsletter.pdf

'In this edition we would draw your attention to the Legal Section on page 10, Amicus Curiae signed by 100 Scientists. The aim of the Amicus Curiae is to provide detailed technical, scientific and historical information through Amici Curiae which document the position of the relevant scientific community regarding the misleading, controversial, and unreliable notions of "repressed-recovered memories", "dissociative amnesia" and related concepts.'

From Leonor at Sense about Science

'As has become customary, we welcomed 2010 by publishing our *Celebrities and Science 2009* review, which you might have seen reported in the press this week. When we went through our files we found some great examples, from Roger Moore saying that foie gras causes Alzheimer's disease to Heather Mills stating that meat sits in your gut for 40 years and causes the disease you die of! You can read the review on our website here:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/about/444/>.

'Coverage so far has included *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *New Scientist*:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-e-1240384/Dont-taken-celebrity-quacks.html>

http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/celebrity/article6974658.ece

http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/celebrity/article6974654.ece

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopping/celebritynews/6929803/Beware-the-celebrity-quacks-Megan-Fox-says-vinegar-will-keep-you-slim.html>

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn18336-politicians-and-celebrities-shamed-for-science-gaffes.html>

'The clean hands mission'

Exhortations to wash your hands more are a major plank in the efforts to stop swine flu, but how much does it really help?

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8437073.stm>

£10,000 grant for the Christian Police Association

A Christian policing group which believes that the power of prayer can catch criminals and keep officers safe from harm has been awarded a £10,000 grant from the Home Office to widen its involvement with local church groups.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/16310000-grant-for-christian-police-who-believe-prayer-can-cut-crime-1882554.html>

UPCOMING EVENTS

14TH EUROPEAN SKEPTICS CONGRESS

The 14th European Skeptics Congress will be hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society in Budapest from 17th-19th September 2010. See the ECSO website (<http://www.ecso.org/>) or visit the Hungarian Skeptics Society website: <http://www.szkeptikusarsasag.hu/en/index.php>

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

<http://cfilondon.org/>.

Meetings are held at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL. Click on the above website for upcoming events.

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

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

Email

tamas.borbely@gmx.com

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. Talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book.

You are strongly recommended to register (at no cost) with the APRU's 'Psychology of the Paranormal' email

list to ensure that you are informed of any future changes to the programme. Visit: <http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

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

This event was founded by Dr Scott Campbell in 1999, for all those interested in the bizarre and the rational approach to extraordinary claims. A speaker is invited each month to present a topic of interest, which is followed by a discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere.

Click onto the above website and then on the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events (and information on any associated local

sceptic group). Current venues are Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Winchester, Ipswich, London, Leicester, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield and Westminster.

‘EXPLORING THE EXTRAORDINARY’

2nd Conference, University of York,
UK, 24th-25th September 2010

‘This conference will be hosted by the Anomalous Experiences Research Unit (<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/soci/research/aeru.htm>), members of which

established ‘Exploring the Extraordinary’ in 2007 at the University of York, with the aim of creating a supportive researcher network that would encourage interdisciplinary links and discussions regarding the study of extraordinary experiences. By “extraordinary” we refer to experiences that are considered by experiments to be beyond the mundane, having significant spiritual or life changing connotations. We include experiences that have been called supernatural, paranormal, mystical, transcendental, exceptional, spiritual, and religious, as well as the

belief systems such experiences may connect to.’

Timescale:

2nd April 2010: Deadline for abstract submissions. Papers should be intended for an interdisciplinary audience

28th May 2010: Deadline for paper submissions

24th-25th September 2010: Conference

Enquiries to:

Dr Hannah Gilbert, Anomalous Experiences Research Unit, Sociology, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answers are as follows:

Stefan wins one pound if the number 2, 4 or 6 comes up; hence his chances of winning are 1 in 2. Marie wins if the numbers 3 or 6 come up; hence her chances of winning are 1 in 3.

1. Stefan wins if the number rolled is 2, 4 or 6, in which case Marie’s chances of winning remain the same at 1 in 3.

2. Marie wins if the number rolled is 3 or 6, in which case Stefan’s chances of winning remain the same at 1 in 2.

3. Stefan loses if the number rolled is 1, 3 or 5, in which case Marie’s chances of winning remain the same at 1 in 3.

4. Marie loses if the number rolled is 1, 2, 4 or 5, in which case Stefan’s chances of winning remain the same at 1 in 2.

It therefore emerges that the probabilities of Stefan winning and of Marie winning are *independent*. The outcome of each has no effect on the other. Another example of independence of probability would be if you and I were to draw a playing card from separate packs; the chances of my drawing, say, a diamond is independent of the card you draw. This would not be

the case if we drew from the same pack without replacement. Likewise, the probabilities of Stephan and Marie’s winning would not be independent if the dice had eight sides instead of the usual six.

5. In the long run, I am the winner, Stefan breaks even, and Marie loses. For example after 6 throws, on average I shall be 2 pounds up entirely at the expense of Marie.

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 <mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>

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