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# Skeptical Adversaria

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The Quarterly Newsletter of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

This issue of the *Skeptical Adversaria* features a critical article on Wikipedia by Ed Buckner (page 2) in which he ends by advising sceptics not to edit Wikipedia.

There may be readers who contribute, or have contributed, to Wikipedia and who would like to present their own views on this important topic. If you are one such reader you are very welcome to have your views aired in the next issue of the newsletter.

### WORLD SKEPTICS CONGRESS 2012

This is to be held in May 2012 in Berlin. Got to [‘The European Scene’](#) for details.

#### The ASKE website

Tony Youens has been revamping the ASKE website, and the members’ section now once more contains back issues of both the *Skeptical Intelligencer* and the *Adversaria*. Eventually all back issues will be available to members - one good reason for readers who are not members to consider joining - for only £10 a year (see the ASKE website).

ASKE members are invited to contribute ideas, information, etc. to the website. I now have a Chairman’s blog there but we are keen to have guest blogs. Anyone who feels they have something useful to say on any topic related to scepticism is welcome to contribute a blog.

### KEEP LIBEL LAWS OUT OF SCIENCE

‘So you think we’ve got free speech in Britain? Think again.’

John Kampfner of *The Independent*.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/john-kampfner-so-you-think-weve-got-free-speech-in-britain-think-again-2176967.html>

‘Nobody sensible wants to abolish libel law, to allow a free-for-all in which reputations are impugned without a right to redress. It’s about balance and proportion.’

John Kampfner is chief executive of Index on Censorship. To sign the libel reform petition go to:

[www.libelreform.org](http://www.libelreform.org);

[Twitter.com/johnkampfner](https://twitter.com/johnkampfner)

#### The 10:23 Homeopathy Campaign



[http://www.1023.org.uk/](http://www.1023.org.uk)

On 5.2.11 people in cities all over the world participated in a mass overdose of homeopathic ‘medicine’. This was the biggest such event to date. Nobody reported any ill effects.

For videos and pictures of the event across Europe (including a demonstration outside the European

Parliament in Brussels) see ‘The European Scene’ (ECSO) on page 11.

While visiting the ECSO website you can also view:

#### James Randi’s Challenge to Homeopathy Manufacturers

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

Randi gives the lowdown on homeopathy in his own inimitable style.

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

The puzzles in the Winter 2010 Newsletter provoked responses from Jan Nienhaus and ASKE member Jim Moyles. (Well I did anticipate some feedback when I asked to be notified of any howlers or flaws in any of my answers.)

### Two cosmic events

Recall the following

‘A spaceship destined for Mars is launched from Earth. It is a fact that this event alters the centre of gravity of the solar system.’

The original version of this due to Thomas Carlisle: ‘It is a mathematical fact that the casting of this pebble from my hand alters the centre of gravity of the universe’.

Before proceeding further, it seems that these two statements are wrong or meaningless. The arguments put forward by Jan in particular are rather complex but I am sure he will let me pass them on to you if you would like to take this further. The following is my interpretation. The gist seems to be that the centre of gravity in a closed system does not change. Although the spaceship and the stone move, due to the actions of these two objects, the Earth also moves imperceptibly. I understand that the assertions don’t work for the centre of mass either. Here I shall have to quote Wikipedia:

‘The term **center of mass** is often used interchangeably with **center of gravity**, but they are physically different concepts. They happen to coincide in a uniform gravitational field, but where gravity is not uniform, **center of gravity** refers to the mean location of the gravitational force acting on a body. This results in small but measurable gravitational torque that must be accounted for in the operation of artificial satellites.’

Recall also the following:

‘The spaceship lands on Mars and the first cosmonaut descends to the surface. Unbeknown to her, immediately her foot touches the Martian surface she becomes a widow, for at that moment her husband dies in a car accident.’

‘Do these events violate any fundamental laws of science?’

This puzzle runs up against the problem that Mars and Earth are moving with respect to one another so, according to relativity it is meaningless to talk about events on the two planets occurring simultaneously. There is a bit

more to it than this and again this information is available on request.

I’m sure the theory of relativity is not a consideration in the following puzzle.

### Are gay people ‘coming out’ at a younger age?

According to a survey reported in November 2010 by Stonewall, the gay rights group, the average age at which people ‘come out’ as gay, lesbian or bisexual has fallen steadily over the last four decades. A poll of 1,500 people who were already ‘out’ found that among the over-60s the average age they had come out was 37. But those in their 30s had come out at an average age of 21, and in the group aged 18 to 24 it was 17. Ruth Hunt, Stonewall’s deputy director of public affairs, said: ‘People are coming out younger and younger’.

Is this conclusion justified?

[Answer on page 15.](#)

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## SKEPTICS’ CORNER

### Wikipedia by Ed Buckner

Wikipedia is an extraordinary idea: an internet encyclopedia that ‘anyone can edit’. It is based on a principle (‘crowdsourcing’) first articulated in 1906 when Francis Galton discovered that the crowd at a country fair accurately guessed the weight of an ox when their guesses were averaged. The average was closer to the true weight than the estimate of any member of the crowd, including expert estimates. According to the principle, a crowd of anonymous people editing Wikipedia

will produce a reference work that is closer to the truth than the work of any individual editor; closer even than the work of any expert on the subject.

Unfortunately the principle of crowdsourcing has not really worked for Wikipedia, for a number of reasons that sceptics, and all those who care about the scientific method, should be concerned about. Everyone at the country fair had an interest in guessing the weight of the ox correctly. Not everyone who edits Wikipedia has an

interest in getting the facts right. This leads to a systematic bias on Wikipedia against scientific neutrality.

I shall briefly talk about the kind of article which is vulnerable to this bias, and give some reasons why it exists at all.

### Articles subject to bias

*The moon landing hoax* is an entertaining place to start:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon\\_landing\\_conspiracy\\_theories](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon_landing_conspiracy_theories)

The conspiracy theories involve the idea that the Apollo program and the moon landings were hoaxes staged by NASA and other organisations. The talk pages are entertaining, and a testimony to the patience and fortitude of those who have strived - in this case successfully - to maintain neutrality. There are 15 archived pages (e.g.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Moon\\_landing\\_conspiracy\\_theories/Archive\\_1\\_5](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Moon_landing_conspiracy_theories/Archive_1_5))

bloated with discussions about Russian hoax proponents, daily vandalism by anonymous IP addresses, fake moon rock and much more. One contributor contests the claim that laser light cannot bounce off the moon, saying it had been done by US scientists before Apollo. Another replies that the 1962 experiment (when a team from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology determined the distance of the moon from reflected laser pulses) used a very long pulse of the laser. Yet another replies, 'The people that said the *Lusitania* was carrying war material were also called idiots at one time. Perhaps you should take a lesson from history. That history may be wrong.' It is a fertile ground for studying the psychology of conspiracy theory, as well as the psychology of those who spend many years trying to combat the unending stream of vandalism from conspiracy theorists.

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**The article on Levitation currently (February 2011) discusses the subject as though it were an established phenomenon.**

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The moon landing hoax article, as well as the 9/11 conspiracy theory article are reasonably well-maintained by moderate (i.e. sceptical) editors. So are the pages on Cold Fusion and Speed of Light, not to mention the whole subject of Creation Science, although they are a constant and bloody battleground.

Move away from the pseudoscience 'mainstream' and into somewhat more

obscure areas, and it is somewhat different. The article on Levitation currently (February 2011) discusses the subject as though it were an established phenomenon. It says, without any qualification, that St. Joannicius the Great levitated above the ground when he prayed, and that he could make himself invisible for people and make others also hidden from sight; that God blessed Saint Martín de Porres with miraculous powers of bilocation, of being able to pass through closed doors (teleportation), and of levitation; that Seraphim of Sarov 'had a gift to levitate over the ground for some time'; that 'many mediums have levitated during séances, especially in the 19th century in Britain and America', although this is qualified by 'however some were proven to be frauds using wires and stage magic tricks'.

**Reasons for bias**

1. *Asymmetry of interest.* The main problem, to return to the analogy with country fairs and oxen, is the way that this analogy breaks down. Everyone at the fair has an interest in estimating the weight of the ox. But sceptics and non-sceptics have entirely different reasons for their interest in a subject of scepticism.

Those who promote 'alternative' theories of reality on Wikipedia do this nearly always because they are the main proponents of the theory, or because they have a financial interest in promoting it. A typical example is the article on Electronic Voice Phenomenon, the idea that the spirits of the dead can communicate through radio or TV. It is represented on Wikipedia by Tom Butler, who is a director of 'Association TransCommunication'. The association maintains a page on its website advising on how to edit Wikipedia, saying that some Wikipedia editors are adherents of James Randi and Robert Carol and that they have 'gone to extremes to purge their ranks of people who seek a balanced presentation of frontier subjects, and to disallow the use of what they refer to as "fringe"

publications'

[http://atransc.org/research/literature\\_research\\_guide.htm](http://atransc.org/research/literature_research_guide.htm).

Another is 'Integral Theory' which is 'an area of discourse emerging from the theoretical psychology and philosophy of Ken Wilber' and which is a synthesis of 'Western and non-Western understandings of consciousness with notions of cosmic, biological, human, and divine evolution into an emerging field of scholarly research focused on the complex interactions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology'. Indeed. This page, as well as the page on Wilber, and a whole category of about two dozen articles, are maintained and defended by Wilber or his followers.

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**An article in Wikipedia is almost certain to be the first result in a search on an internet search engine such as 'Google'.**

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There are a handful of editors, sceptics or scientists, who have an ideological and independent commitment to the truth, as far it can be derived from 'reliable sources'. But they have no particular interest in Integral Theory, or in The Seven Cosmic Planes, or Implicate and Explicate Order, Noetic Consciousness, etc., as such. They are interested in all such pages in general, but none in particular. They must spread their resources across all such pages. They can make corrections, but the defenders of the page will generally reverse them later on. It is like policing local crime. The police can come and caution individuals in a neighbourhood, even make arrests. But they cannot maintain a constant presence. As soon as they go to another neighbourhood, crime will return. This makes the struggle uneven, and painful, and in the end the sceptical editors burn out, as has happened on a number of occasions.

2. *Conflict of interest.* An article in Wikipedia is almost certain to be the first result in a search on an internet search engine such as 'Google'. This

provides a strong incentive for any pressure, cult, crank or nationalist group to promote their point of view. People used to talk about the 'military-industrial complex' in the 1960s. Now there is the 'Google-Wikipedia complex'. Search for 'Integral Theory' in Google, and a number of sponsored links appear at the top and at the side, together with thousands of links in the body of the search. These are advertising cures for all kinds of ailments - mental, bodily and spiritual. How do I know whether these cures are reliable, and that their purveyors are reputable? Well, first among these stands the Wikipedia article on Integral Theory. It has some sort of reputation among the public as a reliable source. They do not realise that Wikipedia is just another advertisement. The people and organisations and companies who market these products are also heavily involved in the promotion of the corresponding Wikipedia page.

Thus there is an inherent conflict of interest in the principle of 'anyone can edit' and 'anyone can make their point of view public to everyone on the Internet'. A fringe editor has a strong reward in seeing their biased advertising in full public view. The reward for the sceptic is for no one to see it, and so their contribution is entirely invisible. Since there is no reward system in Wikipedia for enforcing neutrality - editors are anonymous and unpaid and receive no official recognition for their efforts - there is a flaw in the whole 'compensation system'.

3. *Wikipedia policy.* In any case, there is a further problem facing sceptics. The default in Wikipedia is that information should stay. The burden of proof, for those who wish to remove claims, is to prove that the claim is not supported by 'reliable sources'. There is no clear agreement on what a reliable source is ('article in peer reviewed journal' does not eliminate nearly enough pseudoscience). Removing bogus claims is a tedious, time-

consuming and emotionally draining process.

4. *Wikipedia design.* Yet another problem is a design flaw in Wikipedia itself. Accounts are anonymous, and although it is prohibited, there is nothing to stop an individual from creating as many different accounts as they want. The use of alternative accounts or 'sockpuppets' is widespread.

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administration itself.**

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Careful use of these can make support for a certain issue appear stronger than it actually is. It is not uncommon to see five to ten accounts on one talk page, vigorously contesting some disputed point, when in reality there are only two opposing users. Wikipedia has rules against this, but they are difficult to enforce. Both anti-sceptics and sceptics use these tactics, and examination of any 'sockpuppet investigation' page (enforced by the Wikipedia administrators) shows the intensity and complexity of the unending sockpuppet wars. Those administrators who police for the use of sock accounts use sophisticated surveillance techniques that match IP addresses, behaviour, tell-tale signs such as edit commentary and so on. They use terms like 'sock farms' 'sockmasters' 'sleepers', and so on, which sound like something out of some cold war spy drama, rather than a comprehensive and reliable reference work. To get a sense of this, see e.g. the investigation on Shutterbug:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_talk:Sockpuppet\\_investigations/Shutterbug](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:Sockpuppet_investigations/Shutterbug) (a scientology sockmaster).

5. *Wikipedia administration.* The final problem is the Wikipedia administration itself. As we saw, both sceptics and anti-sceptics use all kinds of dubious tactics in this dirty war. Anyone caught playing dirty will be blocked by

an administrator, unless they have influence in the Wikipedia administration itself. Wikipedia has an administration which is supposed to be neutral, but it was long ago infiltrated both by members of the pseudoscience establishment and sceptic groups (prominent among early members of the administration were both anti-scientologists, who are a sort of sceptic, and members of Ayn Rand's 'objectivist' cult, who are not). Regular battles in the rank and file are mirrored by intense secret battles in the administration, including the powerful 'arbitration committee', who are the final court of appeal.

A number of editors, most of them with academic credentials, were banned between 2005-2008 by a powerful member of the administration (later a member of the Arbitration Committee) who apparently had a commercial interest in 'Neurolinguistic Programming' - a lucrative variety of pseudoscience whose business model is selling the methods of curing people of their emotional and existential problems, rather than selling the cure itself. The financial interest in editing Wikipedia is too great for this problem to be solved by any simple method. There is a market for purchasing articles in Wikipedia, as well as a market for 'administrator accounts' which give users great power (accounts sell for about \$1-2,000, articles can be bought for as little as \$200).

### Summary

What should sceptics do? My advice is emphatically not to edit Wikipedia. It is painful and one-sided and stressful. A better practice is to select some area of pseudoscience or cultism or crankism, and document its treatment on Wikipedia. Much of the success of Wikipedia is based on credulous media coverage, as well as a flawed study by *Nature*, often quoted, which compared Wikipedia favourably with *Britannica*. The page on 'criticism of Wikipedia' contains few links to academic studies, and Wikipedia is ripe for such a study.

## Comments on Mark Newbrook's 'More made-up languages!' by Ray Ward

I was interested to see what Mark Newbrook says about artificial languages (*Skeptical Adversaria*, Winter 2010, pp. 4-6). I take his point that Esperanto is not "neutral" but clearly an Indo-European language grammatically. But then, no language possibly could be neutral, and there are other and more fundamental reasons why such languages are useless. Indeed, I have long found it difficult to think of anything more glaringly obviously doomed to failure than artificial languages like Esperanto. There is a joke which sums up one of the main reasons why this is so in seven words:

'Do you speak Esperanto?'

'Like a native!'

Not the funniest joke in the history of the world perhaps, but it does make the point that, because such languages are no-one's first or native language, everyone has to learn them, and people are understandably reluctant to learn languages unless they can see good reason to do so. (Yes, I do know about people brought up in Esperanto-speaking environments who therefore learnt the language as naturally as most people learn their first languages. They are, of course, a vanishingly small and utterly insignificant minority.) There may be good reasons to learn some natural languages. There are certainly excellent reasons to learn English if one doesn't know it already; indeed, the teaching of English as a foreign language is one of the biggest industries in the world, something which seems very little realised by the vast majority of those of us who, as someone put it, won one of the top prizes in the lottery of life and learnt English as our first language. There are no similar good reasons to learn Esperanto, because the number of users is simply too small to be significant and, perhaps even more important, Esperanto is a closed world, of virtually no practical use or importance whatsoever outside that world. (And if that is true of Esperanto, far and away the most successful

artificial language, it is much more so of other such languages.)

When someone is very interested in something and it absorbs a large proportion of their time it is all too fatally easy to get the impression that it is far more significant than it is. Esperantists (as they call themselves) no doubt communicate in Esperanto, hold get-togethers where they (naturally!) speak Esperanto, and may think they are involved in something important. But, outside the small (very small, by comparison with the numbers of users of many other languages), closed world of Esperanto it is utterly insignificant, not used for any important writings or communications in any field of the arts and sciences and including no worthwhile literature of any kind. Esperantists may communicate in Esperanto, but the chances against two people, not previously acquainted and with no other language in common, meeting or otherwise getting in touch *purely by chance* (as opposed to through a shared interest in Esperanto) and finding to their joy and delight that they can communicate in Esperanto must be truly enormous. (Don't tell me it's happened: I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that it has. But if it has it must be very rare indeed.) Bill Bryson, in his book *Mother Tongue*, says the odds against a chance meeting between two Esperantists must be about the same as those against two Norwegians meeting purely by chance in, say, Mexico; I would put them far higher.

I'd like to end with a story whose relevance to my main theme may not be immediately obvious, but have patience and all will be revealed.

During the Second World War American bomber crews on high-altitude missions found they were arriving at their targets sooner than expected, or even overshooting them, because they were being blown along by apparently impossibly fast winds so that their speed over the ground was much higher than their speed through the air. When they

returned to base and reported this phenomenon they were at first disbelieved, but it was soon established these very high-velocity winds at great altitudes were real. They were dubbed the jet stream and are now taken into account when planning high-altitude flight paths. However, the jet stream had in fact been investigated long before, in the 1920s, by - somewhat ironically - a Japanese scientist, Oishi Washaburo. He did report his findings, and perhaps realised that if reported in Japanese they would be almost completely unnoticed outside Japan. They did, however, nonetheless remain largely unnoticed outside Japan because he wrote in Esperanto! (He was the second President of the board of the Japan Esperanto Institute, and his involvement with Esperanto had perhaps given him an exaggerated notion of the extent to which the language was used.) By a further irony, his findings would probably have attracted more attention if they *had* been disseminated in Japanese, since the number of people outside Japan who knew Japanese was almost certainly greater than the number who knew Esperanto. It is a good example of important scientific work going almost completely unknown because it was reported in a little-known language.

### Reply

By Mark Newbrook

My only point is that my comment about Esperanto being IE was (openly) directed only at naive claims (mostly by Esperantists who do not know linguistics or any non-IE languages) to the effect that it really is 'neutral'. I agree that it is impossible for an aux lang to be genuinely neutral; for example, it must have SOME preferred word order, SOME degree/type of affixation, etc. Being IE is a 'fault' only in so far as it favours IE-users over others without (usually) admitting that this is so. Obviously, Esperanto has some genuine faults as well (though I think that 'useless' is too strong a word here).

## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

*What should I believe? Why Our Beliefs about the Nature of Death and the Purpose of Life Dominate our Lives* by Dorothy Rowe. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2009, (pp xviii + 294).

Reviewed by Sandro G. Masoni

Very informative, beautifully written, and rich with brilliant observations, this book is articulated in eight chapters that can be regarded as somehow belonging to more than one single literary genre. Such variety is fully justified, in my view, by the fact that dealing with so complicated a matter – different religious (or unreligious) points of view held by different people facing different lives and maybe having different ideas about death – is a book written by a psychologist who is an experienced therapist and wants to let some of her patients speak, on this occasion, for the readers' benefit. This is the case in Chapters 3, 5, and 6, as we'll see in a while.

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### **Religious fundamentalism often leads to violence, and pseudosciences frequently deprive of actual cures numerous deceived people.**

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The first chapter is about the increasing presence on the recent and current public scene – I'd say worldwide – of religion, in a rather pervasive way. Religious ideas are enthusiastically embedded in politicians' speeches, and fundamentalism is thriving all around, embraced by increasing numbers of Christians as well as Muslims, Jews and Hindus. At the same time – perhaps unsurprisingly – the scientific point of view is more and more often neglected, while scientific-like terms are illegitimately used by Intelligent Design supporters and all sorts of con-people. Religious fundamentalism often leads to violence, and pseudosciences frequently deprive of actual cures numerous deceived people. This chapter is also rich with very interesting quotations,

especially from famously unreligious authors and relatively 'liberal' – i.e. not fundamentalist – religious authorities.

The second chapter starts pointing out how neurosciences can today challenge – through the increasing knowledge concerning our natural processes – all fundamentalisms. We only have access to what surrounds us by means of our organs of sense, whose inputs are processed by the brain. The brain offers us a vivid representation of the world, which of course is not the same thing as the world itself. But we need that such data do make sense to us, representing the world in the most dependable way, and each one of us needs to build a strong sense of being a person. On the one hand, since no-one has access to absolute knowledge, first of all we should be aware of that, and try our best (and this calls for science) to gain valuable knowledge. On the other hand, people often need to stick obstinately to unproven beliefs, mostly acquired at an early age, in order to maintain a sense of identity.

From the third chapter on, Dorothy Rowe's specificity as a therapist is clearly shown. She wants the reader to feel a sense of the role that some beliefs play in different individuals' lives. So she lets us know about each person's story and ideas without direct references, at first, to the main themes of this book. In order to understand the relation of each person with religious beliefs, we need to know about their backgrounds and their thoughts and feelings about different facts and ideas. So, in these parts of the book, Rowe lets several patients of hers speak with their own voices, often revealing various traits of each one's personality which are not directly related to the main subject matters of the book, before

dealing explicitly with them. Thus also some sense of suspense is created, by the way, when each patient starts telling her or his story. Are these the words (and the experiences) of a believer or of an unbeliever? Of a former believer or of a future believer? We see how various psychological needs – e.g. strong, compelling desires, like the one of being (and being considered) good – are connected to religious instances.

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### **The seemingly strong meaning that religion offers even seems to justify, in the eyes of many religious persons, some brutality in teaching it to children.**

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Chapter 7 and 8 leave therapist's sessions aside and deal, respectively, with the origin and the consequences of belief. In Rowe's view, the very fact that makes necessary – for so many people – a kind of religious belief or another is, well, death. She interestingly explains that, if we were to live a never-ending life, we could find different "meanings of life" along the way and then abandon them and replace them as we go on. But our awareness of life's dramatically limited time span calls for an adequately strong meaning to be assigned. The seemingly strong meaning that religion offers even seems to justify, in the eyes of many religious persons, some brutality in teaching it to children. There are people who would not find comfortable at all telling children about stuff like eternal unbearable torments in Hell. But many Christians do that, and so they help the survival of their religion through the centuries. Chapter 7 also recounts experiences that can be easily interpreted as mystical, if one has that

inclination, but are of course much more interesting if examined in a scientific way. However, a religious person usually is very reluctant when it comes to analysing the birth and growth of personal religious belief. In a rather similar fashion, as we see in Chapter 8, a believer tends not to see the consequences of unquestioned faith. It's not only a matter of believing things which are probably not true. Unquestioned belief can easily make people deny evident facts standing right in front of their eyes. Like the tragic cases of religious or political faith (or

some other kind of unquestioned and somehow convenient belief) leading the believers to deny the simple fact that human beings are human beings. Before persecution and massacres, some kind of conceptual "dehumanisation" often occurs. Like the colonists who used to see Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia as specimens of an inferior species, or the Nazis who tried to turn Jewish prisoners into nonhuman entities. It's easy to see that such ways of seeing (or not seeing) things can exert an enormous influence upon the behaviour of those who hold such beliefs, and can bring the

gravest consequences upon the people considered inferior. A very strong unproven belief is however a symptom of a believer's weak personality. So, to do ourselves justice (and not be unjust to others), let's choose very carefully our beliefs, as Dorothy Rowe suggests, and let's not attribute them (just because they make us feel stronger, at a certain point) a higher value, regarding their truthfulness and their morality, than they deserve.

Well, this is all far better written in Rowe's book, actually, but you know what I mean.

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**Miscarriage of Memory: Historic Abuse Cases - a Dilemma for the Legal System. Edited by Norman Brand and others. Bradford on Avon: British False Memory Society (BFMS), 2010, ISBN 978 0 9555184 1 6.**

Reviewed by Ray Ward

*This book was mentioned in the Skeptical Adversaria, Winter 2010, page 9. Here is the promised review:*

Some years ago there arose the idea that, no matter how imperfect and incomplete conscious memory may be, a complete, and completely accurate, record of every experience one has ever had is somehow preserved in the brain and can be retrieved by psychotherapy. This is, of course, nonsense: such memories can be just as false as conscious memories, and it is possible for memories to be completely convincing but entirely false.

The book gives an example: an American suffered so severely from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) allegedly arising from capture and torture by the Viet Cong that he eventually committed suicide. Only later did his widow discover he had never been in Vietnam. About a million Americans were treated for PTSD believed to arise from experiences in Vietnam, but fewer than 300,000 actually saw combat there. But the belief that such retrieved memories are accurate led to appalling miscarriages of justice as parents and others were

convicted of alleged long-ago abuse which never happened.

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**About a million Americans were treated for PTSD believed to arise from experiences in Vietnam, but fewer than 300,000 actually saw combat there.**

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The book gives factual accounts of some of the injustices and accompanying family tragedies when prosecution evidence is based on "memories" allegedly recovered by complainants while undergoing psychotherapy or coming under other authoritative influences, mostly drawn from the several thousand case histories reported to the BFMS. There were at the time of publication at least 672 cases where there is known to have been involvement by the police or a higher legal authority.

The book has seven sections:

(1) three accounts of where it all starts: a vulnerable person seeks help, a fertile breeding ground for false memory;

(2) a discussion entitled 'Psychology's Dilemma?'

(3) a description of legal issues;

(4) accounts of police and Crown Prosecution Service investigations, criminal trials, appeals and retrials;

(5) accounts of disciplinary hearings;

(6) a section on justice for the falsely accused third party; and

(7) a discussion of false memory as 'An international evil'.

The opening words of an introductory section by William Burgoyne sum things up neatly:

*Some of the worst miscarriages in the history of the justice system have arisen directly out of a lack of understanding of memory, particularly childhood memory, by judges, juries and prosecution and defence counsels.*

Burgoyne also mentions religious cults where recovered memory practices form

part of their initiation procedures. These are less publicised, but can be no less damaging, than those arising from psychotherapy.

Perhaps the most harrowing story, told in two contributions, is that of a totally innocent man of 81, arrested in front of his family and questioned for a day over alleged abuse 20 years before for which the only evidence was the uncorroborated word of one accuser. He was now suffering from serious mental illness - this, in itself, being regarded as evidence of childhood abuse though, in fact, he showed bizarre behaviour *before* he was supposedly abused. The accused was released on bail, had to live through a year-long investigation, and then faced eight charges under the Sexual Offences Act 1956. There was a familiar pattern: 'trawling' for evidence; totally innocent details regarded as suspicious; and the accuser feeding his psychotherapist exactly what he knew she was looking for, which she fell for hook, line and sinker and regurgitated as proven fact. The accuser had a history of seeking sympathy and support, and the accusations gave him someone to blame for his mental illness - it was not his fault. Fortunately the case fell apart on the wild implausibility of the accusations: the accuser would have had to have been abused two or three times on every encounter with the accused, in a busy house with the defendant's wife and other family members present. But an elderly man had been put through a long and dreadful ordeal.

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***As time went on, the allegations became more and more part of my identity.***

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An account by an accuser who eventually admitted that her allegations were false provides clear evidence that children say what they think their interlocutors want to hear:

*As time went on, the allegations became more and more part of my identity. I was identified by the staff*

*and all the other patients as a victim of abuse. In my own head, fiction merged with reality and a fog of confusion descended.*

And, an important point:

*The list of symptoms of survivors of abuse is so wide that of course I displayed a number of genuine 'symptoms'. I also developed others.... And as I repeatedly encoded and retrieved the things I had made up, they effectively became memories. Beyond that, the theory of sexual abuse had explanatory power - it made sense of things otherwise unexplained - and I fell for that.*

A contribution by Dr Peter Naish of the Open University and the BFMS gives an account of his experiences with a young woman who was troubled by 'memories' she felt must be false. He describes his use of hypnosis to bring out information, while emphasising that this was *not* because hypnosis magically accessed hidden memories! She married a man who was involved with 'Wicca' (witchcraft), was referred to a group called SAFE (Supporting Survivors of Sadistic/Satanic Abuse) and, in a familiar pattern, was drawn in from slight initial involvement to two-hour phone calls every night and the inevitable interpretation of every distressing symptom as evidence of abuse. And, naturally, up came the good old heads-I-win,-tails-you-lose: the most convincing indicator of abuse is - no recollection at all of having been abused!

A retired consultant clinical psychologist, Katharine J. Mair, in her contribution 'Creating nightmares: a short history of belief in ritual abuse', describes the alleged nature of such abuse: rape, cannibalism, torture, cageing, forced participation in murder, animal mutilations and the ingestion of blood and other bodily fluids. If true this would, of course, be utterly horrific, but, as she says, no traces of these crimes were ever found and no-one was ever brought to justice. If these things were

happening on the scale alleged there would be bodies, bones, blood; the absence of children and adults would surely be noticed by someone - relatives, neighbours, friends, teachers, doctors.... No such remains were found, nor have people been reported missing on the scale that might be expected. Mair mentions the La Fontaine report (1994), which found no evidence of organised abuse of the kind being reported by therapists, carers and alleged victims and concluded that many 'disclosures' by children were suggested by adults interviewing them. Where Mair worked most people saw no evidence of the effects of ritual abuse on clients, but a few saw it repeatedly, a pattern familiar from paranormal investigations: those who expect to find something tend to find it. As Mair says: '[T]herapists who believe in ritual abuse seem to have an answer for many things that the rest of us find puzzling.'

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***Adults are now running scared of children and young people who know only too well that if they complain the system will swing into action to 'protect' them. What a mess.***

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And - a wonderful get-out - while the possibility of induced memories is denied as an explanation of false memories, believers nonetheless maintain that *abusers* induce false memories of fantastic things like alien abduction to discredit victims' testimony!

The theme of this deeply disturbing book is well summed up by an accused man who had all charges dropped after two years of hell costing him thousands of pounds in research and legal fees:

*Adults are now running scared of children and young people who know only too well that if they complain the system will swing into action to 'protect' them. What a mess.*



# MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

## Michael Heap

### A shocking story

The Newsletter features a review of the book *Miscarriages of Memory*, Edited by Norman Brand and others (reviewed by ASKE member Ray Ward). This book is produced by the British False Memory Society, whose newsletters may be accessed online at:

[http://www.bfms.org.uk/site\\_pages/frameeset.htm](http://www.bfms.org.uk/site_pages/frameeset.htm)

ASKE also receives hard copies of their newsletter and I have just been reading the latest issue. In it there is one of the most shocking accounts of the abuse of psychotherapy by qualified professionals that I have ever read. The case is one of alleged satanic abuse. Please have a look at this account in the online edition of the April 2011 BFMS Newsletter: 'The creation of a satanic myth: An abuse of professional power' by Dr Kevin Felstead. Also visit [www.justiceforCarol.com](http://www.justiceforCarol.com) where there is an extended account of this appalling scandal.

Please also note the programme *Over the Edge* announced on page 13 and the meeting with Elizabeth Loftus organised by the BFMS, announced on page 14.

### Badges of authenticity

Recently I attended a talk given by a well-known contributor to the sceptical assault on alternative medicine. Some practitioners of alternative medicine were in the audience (a good thing at such meetings) and one of them announced that she had recently done a successful trial of her particular therapy on patients with back pain.

Mulling it over afterwards I thought that if I were a purveyor of alternative medicine and wanted to do a '**controlled clinical trial**' to prove its efficacy I would probably choose back pain as the condition to treat. It gives a good response to placebo and if I was not too careful about the design I'd be pretty confident about getting positive results.

(There are lots of clinical trials on back pain for many different treatments that show that they are effective.) I would of course choose a '**peer review journal**' in which to publish my research and could then claim that my treatment is '**evidence-based**'.

'Controlled clinical trial', 'peer review' and 'evidence-based' are foremost among the highly desirable badges of authenticity to which any treatment nowadays should aspire. Moreover as labels, their properties are of such elasticity that they may be successfully recruited for the legitimisation of a wide variety of placebo treatments.

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**Shortly after reunification (1991-1992) measures of the prevalence of back pain in East Germany ranged from 12% to 16% lower than in West Germany. By 2003 the gap was virtually zero.**

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### Back pain and the reunification of East and West Germany

Still on the subject of back pain, I was fascinated to read what has happened to the prevalence of this complaint in the former German Democratic Republic following its reunification with West Germany in October 1990. An account of this may be found in: Raspe, H., Hueppe, A. & Neuhauser, H. (2008) Back pain, a communicable disease? *International Journal of Epidemiology*, **37** (1), 69-74, which is available online at:

<http://ije.oxfordjournals.org/content/37/1/69.full#T2>

According to the authors, back pain currently affects up to 40% of adults in Western Europe. They analysed five health surveys and found that in 1991-1992, shortly after reunification,

measures of the prevalence of back pain in East Germany ranged from 12% to 16% lower than in West Germany. By 2003 the gap was virtually zero.

The authors conclude that 'various processes may have contributed to the observed changes', but point out that following reunification, 'the five new Federal States and East Berlin abruptly had to introduce the Western political, economic, health care, social security and labour market system. The media scene changed from a uniform and centrally regulated to a highly competitive colourful market'. Consequently, '(back-pain) related beliefs, attitudes and behaviour could positively be influenced by media campaigns and by insights from another recent epidemic'. Hence, while back pain is seldom the consequence of a contagious disease 'This does not exclude it from being communicable if "communicable" is to refer to something being transmitted by sharing or exchanging information'.

### Does placebo work if the patient knows it's placebo?

Yes, according to a paper by several US researchers 'Placebos without deception: A randomized controlled trial in irritable bowel syndrome' (T.J. Kaptchuk et al.), available on line at

<http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0015591>

But for a robust assault on this paper consult Orac at:

[http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2010/12/more\\_dubious\\_statements\\_about\\_placebo\\_ef.php](http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2010/12/more_dubious_statements_about_placebo_ef.php)

# LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

## Non-standard epigraphics, railway locos and other deeds of the Fells

Howard Barraclough ('Barry') Fell, who was born in Sussex, UK, but worked mainly at universities in New Zealand and the USA, was an academic marine biologist with a hobby interest in ancient scripts and languages which blossomed hugely in his retirement. He identified Numidian script (from North-West Africa) in 'inscriptions' in New Zealand (the general view is that – apart from the Easter Island 'rongorongo' tablets – there was no written language in pre-colonial Polynesia); he also 'deciphered' the mysterious Cretan Phaistos Disk (discussed in this column in 2008) as written in a mixture of Anatolian (Indo-European) and Polynesian (which implies unrecognised early transoceanic voyages); and he and his followers in the American 'epigraphic' movement have 'found' many pre-Viking writings in the New World, supposedly left there by Shang Chinese, 'Celts' from Ireland or Wales, Egyptians, Libyans, Phoenicians, Israelites using Hebrew, Africans, etc. Fell apparently knew little linguistics and seems to have felt that as a polyglot he did not need the discipline. Only a very few qualified linguists have endorsed any of his 'decipherments' or etymologies. He died in 1994, but his son Julian and others have continued to promote his ideas as obviously sound.

Other members of Fell's family were active in New Zealand in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century; some occupied prominent political and cultural positions in South Island towns such as Blenheim and Nelson. Another New Zealand Fell was a talented railway engineer who designed locomotives with a grip similar to those used on the San Francisco cable-cars; it clutched a central third rail. These locos were used to haul heavy loads over very steep hills such as the Rimutaka Range which separates Wellington from the Wairarapa; the sole surviving such engine is displayed in a

museum in Featherston. As a frequent visitor to Furness (formerly Lancashire, now Cumbria), I have recently learned that yet another Fell (also named Barraclough) lived and worked as an engineer in that area.

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## A number of non-mainstream thinkers have proposed ancestor languages of a specific type with exclusively very short words.

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### Minimal words

A number of non-mainstream thinkers have proposed ancestor languages of a specific type with exclusively very short words: sometimes monosyllabic (like English *pit* or almost all Chinese words), sometimes even 'monophonemic' (consisting of only one speech-sound, like the English indefinite article *a*). Longer words in later forms of the language in question or in later languages are supposed to be etymologically derived from sequences of these minimal words.

One such writer is Leonardi, who holds that all the three-consonant word-stems of Hebrew actually consist of three one-consonant stems. (Hebrew vowels are much less important in identifying stems; this analysis is thus close to a monophonemic one.) For example, the verb *g-l-l* ('release') is a compound of *g-l* ('hold') and *l* ('negate'); in turn, *g-l* is derived from *g* ('repel') and *l* (again, 'negate'). Such a word (or at least the two-consonant component) is treated by other Hebraicists as a single stem.

In fact, it can never have been the case in any language that words were predominantly monophonemic. All languages have between ten and around 100 distinctive speech-sounds (most accents of English have between 40 and

45). These individual phonemes have no meanings of their own; they contribute to the meanings of utterances (and, when written, of written texts) only when combined as words. Thus the initial /n-/ in English *nice* means nothing in itself; it serves only to contrast *nice* with otherwise identical words with different meanings, such as *lice*, *mice*, and *rice*. If all words were as short as English *a*, there would be enormous amounts of homophony (as in English *so* and *sew*), since there would be only 10-100 distinct spoken word-forms to cover the entire vocabulary. Such languages would be unusable.

### More skeptical heroes

A little while ago I discussed some 'skeptical heroes': prominent thinkers who have achieved such a high status in the skeptical community that many other skeptics (who may not be expert in the disciplines in question) hesitate to criticise their ideas and may indeed become offended when they are criticised. I noted that some of these thinkers are – interestingly – best known for their opposition not to obviously 'fringe' thought but to currently popular **mainstream** ideas – especially ideas such as 'global warming' which some believe have been embraced too readily for non-scholarly reasons.

One very salient case of this kind involves the New Zealand-born and Australia-based anthropologist Derek Freeman, who died in 2001. Freeman attacked the claims of the American Margaret Mead (died 1978), who herself has long been something of a hero among anthropologists in the USA. Mead did some fieldwork in Samoa in the 1920s and described Samoan adolescent behaviour as characterised by surprisingly 'free' sexual mores. Freeman also worked in Samoa, albeit later and mainly in a different area; he came to the view that Mead – who had learned little Samoan despite having

been trained and supervised by anthropological linguists – had been misled by her mischievous informants, whose young lives were in fact much less ‘daring’. In their old age, some of these women ‘confessed’ their duplicity to Freeman himself; Freeman also reinterpreted some of Mead’s own writings as supporting his new analysis.

The anthropological world became and remains seriously divided as to the facts of this case. In Australasia in particular, Freeman has been seen as a much more scientific worker than Mead, and his ideas have been wholeheartedly embraced. He and his often devoted supporters have regarded Mead’s allies as uncritical and unscholarly thinkers motivated by loyalty to their ‘guru’. In contrast, many American anthro-

pologists have rejected Freeman’s views as exaggerated or worse.

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**In Australasia in particular, Freeman has been seen as a much more scientific worker than Mead, and his ideas have been wholeheartedly embraced.**

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When I was a member of Victorian Skeptics, I encountered a long-standing local skeptic with anthropological training who had come to feel marginalised by the strident support of Freeman which had become the norm in the movement (Freeman was voted Australian Skeptic of the Year in 1996). In 1999 I organised a debate between

this man and Freeman’s most vocal local advocate. The atmosphere at the meeting was highly charged and some of those on either side were clearly barely able to tolerate their rivals’ opinions. Later I reported on the debate in the Australian skeptical journal, and Freeman himself hinted at legal action, even though my words suggested something of a compromise position and in no way portrayed Freeman himself as wholly in error.

Such cases surely indicate that skeptics, like other thinkers, should take seriously such differences of interpretation, and should not assume that highly-qualified opponents are either stupid or badly motivated. Rancour and dogmatism serve only to bring the movement into disrepute.

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## 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/>

Via the website you can access articles, news, and commentary on a range of topics of interest to sceptics.

### The 2012 World Skeptics Congress

This will be held from 17 - 20 May 2012 in Berlin. There is no information on this yet but watch the ECSO site. (M. Heap is representing ASKE so get in touch if you want to participate or have any ideas.)

### 10:23 Homeopathy Campaign. 5.2.11

Videos of the mass overdose of homeopathy in many cities across Europe may be viewed on this website: <http://www.ecso.org/topics/altmed/36-2011-overdose-events>.

These include a demonstration outside the European Parliament in Brussels. Amardeo Sarma of ECSO has sent the following message:

‘I am trying to keep this website updated – please let me know links to any other 10:23 videos that you may know of. I have cities in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Spain and UK (Europe) and Melbourne and the Antarctic (International).

‘Below are links to the TV news items of the 10:23 action before the European Parliament in Brussels. There were four TV stations present. The fourth was for a Polish TV station, which has no videos on his sites.’

The Flemish state television (VRT, in Dutch):

<http://www.deredactie.be/permalink/1.957106>

The Flemish commercial television (VTM), followed by an interview of a homeopath):

<http://vtm.be/nieuws/binnenland/58388-zelfmoordpoging-met-homeopathie>

And this is in French (RTBF)

<http://www.rtbef.be/video/v-manifestation-contre-l-homeopathie?id=780383&category=info>

Pictures of the event may also be viewed at:

<http://www.flickr.com/skepp/>

**ECSO Press release Rossdorf,  
February 2, 2011  
‘Scientists slam EU consumer fraud.  
European scientists and skeptics  
express concern over health risk via  
homeopathy and other unproven  
remedies’**

Health and consumer protection are top priorities for the EU, with Directives condemning unfair commercial practices, misleading advertising and aggressive sales methods. However, the EU and a number of member states have inexplicably exempted some practices from following objective rules. The requirement for proven efficacy was dropped for a special group of products:

those labeled 'homeopathic' or 'anthroposophic'.

The European Council of Skeptical Organisations (ECSO) objects strongly to this capitulation by the European Union to vested commercial interests that undermine both fairness and health safety. 'This special treatment and blatant promotion of organized scientific misconduct poses a serious threat to health in Europe' says ECSO Chairman Amardeo Sarma. 'Plain water and sugar pills dipped in plain water are being sold as medication under different names with clinical indications', says Willem Betz, ECSO expert on alternative medicine, professor emeritus and previous Head of Department of General Medicine of the Free University of Brussels. 'Nobody can distinguish such magic potions from plain solvent or

sugar, or these products from each other. We offer a prize of 10,000 euros to anyone who can.'

ECSO calls on the EU and its member states to:

- live up to its claim to promote fairness and protect its citizens by preventing consumer and health fraud,
- ensure equal and high standards in testing medical products *without exceptions* and *without regard to special lobby groups*, and
- insist on adhering to the existing high international scientific standards of evidence-based medicine

A first step would be to review and repeal Directives that grant homeopathic products the status of medication without providing good scientific

evidence as is required for all real medication.

ECSO is also supporting the 10:23 campaign. In over 30 locations in 16 European countries, concerned citizens will demonstrate on 5th and 6th February 2011 that highly diluted homeopathic products are liquids or pills that do not contain any trace of the labeled ingredient. The world-wide 10:23 campaign shows that citizens are aware of the inadequacy of homeopathy and reject the continued promotion of homeopathy and other types of useless, fraudulent or harmful medication. 'It is time that politicians and administrators come to their senses', says Sarma.

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## OF INTEREST

### Research project

<http://www.strangesurvey.com/>

Coventry University PhD student Rebecca Smith is currently collecting data for a Grounded Theory based study of anomalous experience. She is keen to receive reports from people who would answer positively to 'Have you ever (when fully awake and unaffected by illness, alcohol or drugs) had an experience of seeing something or someone, or of hearing a voice, when there was no ordinary cause for it that you could find?' or who feel they have experienced 'poltergeist' type phenomena. If you are interested in participating or know people who may be her survey can be found at the above website.

### The Nightingale Collaboration

<http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/>

The 'focus of the month' for April of the Nightingale Collaboration is cranio-sacral therapy. Please submit any information about CST websites and send it to the organisers so they can

submit 'test' cases to the Advertising Standards Authority.

### 'Overdiagnosed: Making people sick in the pursuit of health'

<http://www.beacon.org/productdetails.cfm?SKU=2200>

Authors: Dr H. Gilbert Welch, Dr Lisa M. Schwartz & Dr Steven Woloshin. This book may be ordered from the above website.

### We're all aliens... how humans began life in outer space

<http://ind.pn/g1guHP>

According to *The Independent*, Tuesday, 1 March 2011, 'The mystery of how the building blocks of biology came to be on Earth may finally have been solved'.

### Relaunch of The Skeptical Experience

<http://www.skepticalexperience.co.uk/>

From Richard Godbehere:

'The Skeptical Experience is a live radio and podcast show about all things skeptical. Each week your host, Richard Godbehere, will be inviting a guest on to

argue; debate; disseminate; dissect and generally chat about the weird and wonderful. Over the next few weeks, live guests will be complimented (?) by recorded interviews with people from all over the skeptical world, from Goldsmiths very own APRU PhD candidates, to six figure international subscriber YouTube giants like the Amazing Atheist and DPRJones. There will also be competitions, news, and a bit of skeptical music to keep you entertained.

'You can tweet questions to me for the guests (mrgodbehere), or you can Skype them to me by text (skepticalexperience), and we hope to be taking Skype and telephone calls live into to the studio in the near future, so keep an eye out for that.

'If you think you would be a great guest for the show, as a skeptic or otherwise, then feel free to email the show:

[skepticalexperience@gmail.com](mailto:skepticalexperience@gmail.com).

## Skeptic's Dictionary

<http://skepdic.com/>

'Bob Carroll's excellent *Skeptic's Dictionary* is now available as an iPhone app - well worth 59 pence of anybody's money! Online version also available.' (from Chris French).

'The Skeptic's Dictionary app is now available from iTunes. The SD app was developed by David Knobel and makes access to the core terms listed on the Contents page of the website a breeze. With the SD app you can scroll the contents list from A to Z or search directly for a name or term from among more than 700 items. There are no ads or other distractions, just links to Dictionary entries presented in a font size you can read easily on your phone's screen. The app also works on the iPad.

'The app will load the contents list the first time you use it. After that, you have the option of uploading the latest list or not. A History file will keep track of list items you've visited.

'Requirements: Compatible with iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad. Requires iOS 3.2 or later.' (from Bob Carroll).

## Andrew Wakefield

Alan (Zeno's blog) has pointed out that, contrary to what appeared in last month's newsletter, his blog does not have a commentary on Wakefield, but his wife Maria's blog at [www.skepticat.org](http://www.skepticat.org) does. 'She hasn't covered the latest revelations, but has

written several posts previously.' (<http://www.skepticat.org/tag/andrew-wakefield/>)

## False memory

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2010/s2862588.htm>

## 'Over the Edge'

'Investigative journalism in Australia has produced an excellent programme by Sarah Ferguson on the ABC Network: *Over the Edge*, shown on 5th April 2010 exposes the dangers of untrained therapists in action. See the programme through the above link. It is a harrowing story of the therapist whose work led some patients to believe they'd committed, or been the victim of shocking sexual crimes. Although an amazing exposure it is very distressing. You can watch Sarah Ferguson's report online. Be sure you are up to viewing the programme before you link to it.' (From the latest newsletter of the British False Memory Society.)

## Sense About Science

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

'Thank you to all who responded to my last email about our office move and who donated furniture and money, including the Academy of Medical Educators who gave us six desks. We're still trying to raise enough for the last bits of furniture we need, so if you can help us in any way please do so by going to:

[www.justgiving.com/senseaboutscience](http://www.justgiving.com/senseaboutscience)

or

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

'We are moving on Monday 4<sup>th</sup> April, so from Friday 1<sup>st</sup> April and for a few days we might not be able to respond promptly to emails. From Monday our new contact details will be: New telephone number: 020 7490 9590 New postal address: 14A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1R 0DP

Please note our emails will remain the same.'

## We need less opinion and more scientific research

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/edzard-ernst-we-need-less-opinion-and-more-scientific-research-2171782.html>

Edzard Ernst in *The Independent*: 'There is no good evidence to show that the prescriptions of herbalists do more good than harm.'

## Inside the mind of Scientology's Messiah

<http://newhumanist.org.uk/2458/inside-the-mind-of-scientologys-messiah>

Twenty-five years after L Ron Hubbard's death, Michael Bywater revisits the sacred texts of the pulp science writer turned prophet.

## 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 *Sceptical Intelligencer*? Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

# UPCOMING EVENTS

## NATIONAL SCIENCE TOUR

<http://www.badscience.net/2010/12/im-doing-this-awesome-massive-nerd-tour/#more-1905>

On April 3<sup>rd</sup> (in Glasgow) and throughout May (various towns and cities), Ben Goldacre Simon Singh, Brian Cox and Robin Ince are holding a series of meetings in which they will talk about science 'and it will be funny'. They are also making 'a Spinal Tap tour video'. 'Come! There will be shouting and enthusiasm (*must there be?* – Ed.) and nerd facts just like in our Godless shows and festival stuff. A night like no other, mixing live presentations and fabulous projections of the phenomenal. Prepare to be amazed.'

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

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>  
[tamas.borbely@gmx.com](mailto:tamas.borbely@gmx.com)

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room LGO1 in the New Academic Building, Goldsmiths College, 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 changes to the programme. Visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

and

<http://www.twitter.com/ChrisCFrench>

and

<http://feeds.feedburner.com/apru>

## SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

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

Go to the above website and then choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events (and information

on any associated local sceptic group). Current venues are now so numerous there is almost bound to be a meeting near you.

## CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

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

### Does science support belief in God?

With Prof. Herman Philipse and Prof. Richard Swinburne

Chair: Stephen Law

Tuesday May 10th, 7-9pm.

Main Hall, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn London WC1R 4RL

£3 on the door. £2 students. Free entry to CFI UK friends (i.e. season ticket holders).

An evening with two of the world's most powerful and respected thinkers from either side of the theism/atheism divide. Topics likely to be addressed include: Does the orderliness of the universe point to a designer? Do discoveries in neuroscience, cosmology and other branches of empirical science reveal evidence of the hand of God?

Herman Philipse is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, and one of the world's leading atheist thinkers

Richard Swinburne is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Oxford.

## BRITISH FALSE MEMORY SOCIETY

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

### Lunch with Professor Elizabeth Loftus

'It is with delight and much excitement that the BFMS can announce that the esteemed and distinguished Professor Elizabeth Loftus is to pay a visit to the UK ... and that we have been fortunate enough to secure an audience with her on the morning of 6th July 2011 at a venue in London. Elizabeth Loftus Ph.D. is a Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Law at the University of

California, Irvine. She has carried out extensive research and spearheads the research into human memory. Professor Loftus specialises in the study of human memory as applied to the field of law. She is widely published and the author of the book *Eyewitness Testimony*. She is a world authority on memory capability.

'The day will take the following format: Lecture by Professor Elizabeth Loftus, followed by a Question and Answer session, after which Professor Loftus will join us for lunch and will be happy to talk briefly to people. Please note there will be a charge to cover refreshments, lunch and the hire of the hall. This will be notified at a later date once costs are known.

'If you are interested in attending an audience/conference/debate with Professor Loftus, please register your interest by contacting Sue at the BFMS office.'

## EXPLORING THE EXTRAORDINARY 3<sup>RD</sup> CONFERENCE

Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> – Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> September

*Holiday Inn Hotel, York*

<http://etenetwork.weebly.com>

[ete.network@gmail.com](mailto:ete.network@gmail.com)

Keynote Speakers: Prof Charles Emmons and Dr Serena Roney-Dougal

'Since its inception in 2007, members of Exploring the Extraordinary have organised two very successful academic conferences that have brought together researchers from a variety of different disciplines and backgrounds. The purpose of these events has been to encourage a wider dissemination of knowledge and research, and an interdisciplinary discussion of extraordinary phenomena and experience. By 'extraordinary' we refer to phenomena and experiences that are considered to be beyond the mundane, referring to those that have been called supernatural, paranormal, mystical, transcendent, exceptional, spiritual,

magical and/or religious, as well as the relevance of such for human culture.'

**The 54th Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association**  
August 18th to August 21st, 2011  
in Curitiba, Brazil.

<http://www.parapsych.org/breaking-news.html#18>

'The deadline for the receipt of all submissions is Monday April 11, 2011. Submissions received after this date will be considered only in exceptional

circumstances. Abstracts of all accepted submissions other than workshops will be included in the convention booklet, provided that they are received before the deadline.

'All submissions to the 2011 PA convention, except proposed workshops, must be submitted electronically. They should be emailed as attachments, to the chair of the Program Committee, Dr. Marios Kittenis, at:  
[m.kittenis@aston.ac.uk](mailto:m.kittenis@aston.ac.uk).

Authors who are not online or who for some other reason cannot meet these requirements should contact Marios prior to submission, either by mail: c/o Dr Marios Kittenis, Psychology, School of Life and Health Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, B4 7ET, UK or by phone: +44 121 204 3000 ext. 4318.'

For more details visit the above website.

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

The answer is as follows:

### Are gay people 'coming out' at a younger age?

I am sure readers would consider it a good sign if they were, but the figures don't allow this conclusion. This was spotted by Ben Goldacre in the *Guardian* at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/27/stonewall-gay-data-statistical>

To précis Dr Goldacre: There can be no one in the 18- to 24-year-old group

who came out later than age 24 and some will obviously have come out before the age of 18. Therefore, the average age at which people came out in this group can't be greater than the average age of that group. And certainly it has to be lower than, say, 37, the average age at which people in their 60s came out.

For the same reason, it's very likely indeed that the average age of coming out will increase as the average age of

each age group rises: in fact, if we assumed (in formal terms we could call this a "model") that at any time all the people who are out have simply always come out at a uniform rate between the age of 10 and their current age, you would get almost exactly the same figures (you'd get 15, 23, and 35, instead of 17, 21, and 37).

## ABOUT ASKE

Founded in 1997, 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>

Association for Skeptical Enquiry

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

(Please note that the ASKE PO Box has now been closed down.)

For an electronic copy of this newsletter contact [m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)