
Skeptical Adversaria

2011, Number 2 (Summer)



The Quarterly Newsletter of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry



FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

Ed Buckner's piece on Wikipedia in the Spring issue of the Newsletter provoked a heated debate on ASKEnet (ASKE's email discussion network).

Ed ended his article by advising that ASKE members should not be involved in editing Wikipedia. One counter viewpoint was that although Wikipedia's coverage of fringe topics has severe problems this may in fact be due to sceptics *not* getting involved. Mention was made of the Wikiproject Rational Skepticism or the Fringe Noticeboard; if more sceptics, including ASKE members, got involved 'fringe-agenda - pushers would be less able to get away with what they do'.

To find out about Wikiproject Rational Skepticism go to:
http://www.google.co.uk/search?source=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4ADRA_enGB420GB421&q=Rational+Skepticism+Wikiproject

And for the Fringe Theories Noticeboard go to:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Fringe_theories/Noticeboard

Any other comments and suggestions are welcome for inclusion in the next Newsletter.

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence

'Journal rejects studies contradicting precognition' is the title of an article in *New Scientist* on 5 May 2011 accessible at: <http://bit.ly/jCPlvC>.

Readers may recall that in the Winter 2010 Newsletter the subject of the

editorial was the experimental work of Professor Daryl J. Bem of Cornell University. Professor Bem has published a paper in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* reporting the results of nine experiments that have found statistically highly significant effects for the retroactive influence of stimuli (i.e. stimuli that have yet to be presented) on participants' performance in various cognitive tasks. A draft version of Professor Bem's paper is at <http://www.dbem.ws/FeelingFuture.pdf> and a summary and discussion is at <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn19712-is-this-evidence-that-we-can-see-the-future.html>

Recently Professor Chris French made the following announcement 'Stuart Ritchie (Edinburgh), Richard Wiseman (Herfordshire) and my team at the APRU each conducted an attempted replication of one of Daryl Bem's recently published studies of precognition. The original studies, published in the highly respected *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (JPSP), received a considerable amount of media coverage due to the controversial nature of the claims made.

Contents

<u>From the ASKE Chairman</u>	1
<u>Logic and Intuition</u>	2
<u>As Seen on Television</u>	3
<u>From the Bookshelf</u>	4
<u>Medicine on the Fringe</u>	5
<u>Language on the Fringe</u>	6
<u>The European Scene</u>	8
<u>Of Interest</u>	8
<u>Upcoming Events</u>	10
<u>Logic and Intuition: Answer</u>	11
<u>About ASKE</u>	12

'The Bem paper included an explicit appeal to psychologists to attempt replications. We chose to try to replicate the experiment reporting the largest effect size. None of our three studies produced results supporting the original claim.

'We submitted our report to JPSP but it was rejected on the grounds that the journal has a policy of not publishing

straight replications. The paper has subsequently been rejected without peer review by *Science Brevia* and *Psychological Science*. This highlights the serious issue of publication bias in science. Although replication is said to be the cornerstone of science, it is actually very difficult to get the ‘top’ journals to even consider publishing such studies. They only want to consider (a) new findings and (b) positive results. This seriously biases the scientific literature.’

‘Ben Goldacre has also written on this recent episode at: <http://bit.ly/fZ44v9>.’

An account of this affair has also appeared in *The Psychologist* (June 2011, Vol 24(6), pp406-7). In this, one of the JPSP editors, Professor Eliot Smith, reiterates the journal’s longstanding policy of not publishing

replications and reveals that the journal has also rejected ‘a successful replication of Bem’s work’.

The paucity of published successful or unsuccessful replications of experimental research is of concern.

The paucity of published successful or unsuccessful replications of experimental research is of concern, at least in psychology (I can’t speak for other disciplines). The authors of theoretical papers, chapters and books constantly refer to published research findings to support their position, but the majority of these are single studies with no replication.

Now visit the following webpage for an announcement by Richard Wiseman: <http://www.richardwiseman.com/BemReplications.shtml>

‘If you are intending to replicate one or more of Bem’s studies, please take a few moments to register the details of your studies by emailing caroline.watt@ed.ac.uk with the following information (*see webpage*).

‘We will carry out a meta-analysis of all registered studies. This analysis will only include those studies that have been registered by 1 June 2011, and that have been completed by 1 December 2011. In twelve months’ time we will contact everyone who has registered and ask for the data required to calculate the outcome measures used in Bem’s paper.’

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The puzzles I like the best are often those that are expressed in a few words. The puzzle below certainly qualifies for this description.

Friends at a party

While browsing through books in the shop at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, I came across a book of puzzles. Most of these were not of great interest to me but one that stood out goes as follows.

‘At any party there will always be at least two people who have the same number of friends present. True or false?’

If you get stuck, here is a hint (in reversed text) to start you going:

.sdrawpu krow dna srednetta fo rebmun mumini eht htiw tratS

[Answer on page 15.](#)

Call for Contributions

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

AS SEEN ON TELEVISION

***Miracles for Sale.* Presented by Derren Brown, Mon 25 April 2011, 9pm, Channel 4.**

Reviewed by Ray Ward

I thought this an excellent programme deserving extensive comment. Brown's introduction did not mince words:

You are about to see a world where greed and deceit raise their ugly heads, where lives have been needlessly lost and where hope, the most precious gift of all, is peddled at a price. This is the wickedness of the world of faith-healing, and tonight I take an ordinary man and attempt to turn him into a faith-healer, putting him on stage in Texas, the heart of the Bible Belt, where he must convince an audience of staunch believers that he is capable of performing miracles before their very eyes.

As Brown says, no healer has ever been able to produce a single piece of evidence for a single miraculous healing, and when it is found that nothing has changed they always blame the victim's lack of faith. But believers throw away their medicines, donate huge sums - sometimes their life savings - and, of course, sometimes die.

A temporary production company was set up and advertised for people who wanted to star in their own television show, with no hint of its real nature or that Brown was involved. Two hundred were reduced to three who, after minimal training, tried to convince an audience they were experienced stage hypnotists, this skill being very closely related to faith healers' methods. Brown eventually chose Nathan, a scuba-diving instructor, and when he told him the true nature of the project he agreed to co-operate. Nathan became Pastor James Collins (note the initials!) and, since some people would certainly check him out, a fake website was created for him, and a story that he had been working in Uganda to explain why he was not previously known.

Brown demonstrated healers' tricks and how they were done: a deaf woman

could hear (but she wasn't totally deaf and could hear the demonstration sounds behind her); a blind man could see (well, he could; like most registered blind people he wasn't totally blind); and a short leg 'grew' (the other shoe was pulled out so the leg lengths apparently matched). Elsewhere in the programme it was explained that an emotional 'high' and a rush of adrenalin such as is created at 'healing' meetings can reduce pain. And there are less subtle methods: the famous case of Peter Popoff, who apparently divined very detailed information on audience members, is described. James Randi arranged for the cues from his wife, read off information cards which the audience filled in and transmitted via an earpiece, to be recorded. Popoff went bankrupt but - you guessed it - is now back at his old game.

When (naturally!) she found she was no better and was, in fact, worse, the healer told her she had 'secret sin' in her life.

The team went to a meeting featuring the 'healer' W.V. Grant, and tested if he was using the Popoff technique of taking information from contact cards. The producer, David, filled in his name as James. When he was called, Grant said his name had five letters - well, right so far! - beginning with J - James!

In Dallas the team met the people who run the Trinity Foundation, who investigate fraudulent faith-healers and televangelists and knew the true nature of their mission. One of them told the story of a woman whose daughter had multiple sclerosis and tried faith-healing. When (naturally!) she found she was no better and was, in fact, worse, the healer told her she had 'secret sin' in

her life and the girl, then 14, committed suicide in the most appalling way, by pouring petrol over herself and setting fire to it. And Brown discovered another example of the dreadful dangers of belief in faith-healing: a former preacher, working apparent miracles, had a daughter who died of a brain tumour after he delayed seeking proper medical help, believing God would heal her. He eventually told his congregation the truth and revealed his techniques: building up hysteria, mass semi-hypnosis, 'adrenalin shoots through the body, the pain's gone'.

Nathan rehearsed and began to have doubts but decided to go ahead. He went to a 'healing' service where a wildly histrionic preacher pumped up the hysteria, inducing a form of mass hypnosis, the main aim being to create a major adrenalin rush. Adrenalin is a powerful painkiller; people feel less pain and mistake this for their body being healed. And, of course, money was collected: as Nathan perceptively said afterwards: 'They should be talking about faith and love and it's always about money.'

Brown also had doubts, and said:

I keep having to remind myself that it's important. People throw away their medicine and they die.... People give their last penny to this movement, money they can't afford.... People that don't get healed are told to blame themselves, because their faith wasn't strong enough.... When I speak to people who have had first-hand experience of how nasty that world can be it keeps me going, it reminds me that it is important.

Before the show Nathan walked the streets of Dallas practising his skills. Despite the fact that those he met had not been prepared in the hysteria of a meeting they 'worked' on every single volunteer. Brown summed it up: 'I'm

astonished at how effortless it is. The nature of pain is clearly so subjective.'

The show went well and the audience obviously all believed this ordinary man, a scuba-diving instructor, was a real faith-healer. Just as with others, he was fed information on some audience members from contact cards. He told one he was 'worried about a condition of the blood – diabetes', and the man agreed he had diabetes - which is not a blood disorder! Nathan had no

trouble creating exactly the same effects seen before in such hyped-up atmospheres. But at the end, instead of asking for money, he gave a carefully-worded speech which, while not admitting he was a fake, warned against fraudulent healers who tell people to discard their medicines and take money from those who can ill afford it. He and Brown then left hastily, uncertain of the reaction.

The programme ended with W.V. Grant 'healing' Derren Brown himself with the aforementioned leg-lengthening trick. Brown said finally that they were not attacking faith or sincere belief but the systematic and manipulative exploitation of the vulnerable, where greed can ruin people's lives, and all in the name of faith. This was a very revealing and disturbing programme deserving wide attention and dissemination.

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

***Who Holds the Moral High Ground?* by Colin Beckley and Elspeth Waters. Exeter: Societas, 2008. ISBN 9781845401030.**

Reviewed by Ray Ward

This excellent book, by a student of the Philosophy of Science and a freelance journalist and editor, asks if there are universal moral principles, or if what counts as 'good' is simply a matter of personal opinion; if morals are the product of a particular society or culture; to what ethical criteria modern secular societies should defer; if religion can be considered a reliable authority; and if women are more virtuous than men.

Brief but good summaries of common misconceptions, criteria, the religious legacy, religious diversity (the Abrahamic and Dharmic religions), ethical diversity in religion, their interpreters and syncretic religions are followed by equally admirable discussions of Kant, Hume, Utilitarianism, negative utilitarianism and the psychological evidence, attitudes to other species, relativism, virtue ethics (with a revisit to Aristotle), the gender issue and the ethical stew, and key essentials, ending with a concise chronology of major ethical perspectives and a very useful glossary. The authors amusingly cite Enid Blyton's Mr Meddle as an example of good intentions, though commendable, not always being sufficient for performing good acts! The fissiparousness of religions is well brought out.

Like many books on this subject, examples of moral dilemmas are given, though, as is also often so, some are decidedly implausible and very unlikely to arise in real life, such as: you see a man in mortal danger and have the power to save him. Do you do so? Obviously, you might think. But then you recognise him as a notorious terrorist who has murdered many people and will probably murder many more if allowed to live.... Less implausible is whether one would lie to save the life of a loved one. But, as the authors appositely say, 'in real life, things can always go wrong'.

'Being obedient is not necessarily being moral; as individuals, we must take responsibility for our own actions and decisions.'

Despite, as the authors recognise, the fact that 'the task of producing a modern-day Ten Commandments could take forever and still be deemed unsatisfactory', they give a list of Key Essentials, a framework distinguishing moral activity from other practices. Individuals will, they appreciate, weigh the points differently, but anyone who

follows the criteria is much more likely to reach a more satisfactory decision. The criteria are discussed in some detail and very clearly and interestingly. One striking sentence deserving quotation is: 'Being obedient is not necessarily being moral; as individuals, we must take responsibility for our own actions and decisions' - bringing to mind the 'I was just obeying orders' plea which was deemed unacceptable for war criminals.

To someone of my age (63), who has seen apparently enormous changes in attitudes to sex roles, the chapter on gender is particularly interesting - if only to show that things are different elsewhere: 67% of illiterate adults are women; 1% of the titled land in the world is owned by women; worldwide, 85 million girls and 45 million boys are unable to attend school; and a woman dies in childbirth every minute.

The index could, however, be better - despite the attention paid to the subject, there is no entry under Gender, or under Women, Men, Girls or Boys.

This book is nowhere near the final word on the subject, nor do the authors claim so, but it is a most interesting and articulate concise discussion which can be recommended.

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

Herbal medicine and the European Community

Since May 1st 'traditional herbal medicines' available in health food shops, pharmacies, and other outlets in the European Union must be formally registered and approved before they can be sold. Only products whose use is 'plausible on the basis of longstanding use and experience' and whose quality and safety are 'guaranteed' will be licensed.

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The new requirements are set out in the EU's Traditional Herbal Products Directive. Agreed in 2004. This gave manufacturers of traditional herbal remedies a seven year transitional period to register their products already on sale in the EU with the relevant national authorities. See:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/human-use/herbal-medicines/index_en.htm

and

www.mhra.gov.uk/Howweregulate/Medicines/Herbalmedicines/PlacingaherbalmedicineontheUKmarket/TraditionalHerbalMedicinesRegistrationScheme/index.htm

Electromagnetic fields and cancer

In May 2010 the World Health Organisation issue a 'facts sheet' entitled 'Electromagnetic fields and public health: Mobile phones' (1). The document listed the following key points:

- Mobile phone use is ubiquitous with an estimated 4.6 billion subscriptions globally.
- To date, no adverse health effects have been established for mobile phone use.
- Studies are ongoing to assess potential long-term effects of mobile phone use.
- There is an increased risk of road traffic injuries when drivers use mobile phones (either handheld or 'hands-free') while driving.

A year on, in May 2011, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, published a report (2) reviewing the available evidence for a possible carcinogenic effects of exposure to radiofrequency electromagnetic fields. The conclusions of the report are:

'The evidence, while still accumulating, is strong enough to support a conclusion... that there could be some risk, and therefore we need to keep a close watch for a link between cell phones and cancer risk.

'Given the potential consequences for public health of this classification and findings it is important that additional research be conducted into the long-term, heavy use of mobile phones. Pending the availability of such information, it is important to take pragmatic measures to reduce exposure such as hands-free devices or texting'.

It is clear from the report's findings that the evidence for a carcinogenic effect is weak and inconsistent and that the panel have adopted a very cautionary position. The classification it arrives at is the same as that for coffee and pickled vegetables.

Discussions of the IARC report may be found at (3) and (4).

A more alarmist stance has been adopted in a recent report by the European Union (5) which has provoked headlines to the effect that, for example,

WiFi should be banned in schools. A critical account of this entitled 'Alarming lack of science behind European wireless tech health alert' may be found at (6). Here is a taster.

'As we reported yesterday (7) the Council of Europe has released a report that recommends that its member states treat the radiation used in wireless communication as a potential health hazard, one on par with cigarettes and genetically modified foods. States are encouraged to take measures to limit exposure, such as encouraging a return to wired phone lines and banning the use of WiFi in schools. Those are pretty radical responses for what remains a purely hypothetical risk - how did the report end up being so extreme?

It is clear from the report's findings that the evidence for a carcinogenic effect is weak and inconsistent and that the panel have adopted a very cautionary position.

'Fortunately, the report itself provides some hints as to how its author came to his conclusions. In doing so, it provides a caution about how politicians can take ambiguous science and latch onto some evidence selectively, creating a severely biased perspective. Most worryingly, it shows how they can do their best to ensure that others end up adopting the same perspective.'

Sources

1. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs193/en/>
2. http://www.iarc.fr/en/media-centre/pr/2011/pdfs/pr208_E.pdf
3. <http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/mobiles/piercing-the-fog-around-mobile-phones-and-cancer-20110607-1fq2a.html#ixzz1OZoGftv6>

4. <http://www.significancemagazine.org/details/webexclusive/1075455/Mobile-phones-and-brain-cancer---Why-its-OK-to-be-unsure.html>

5. <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc11/EDOC12608.pdf>

6. <http://arstechnica.com/science/news/2011/05/european-politician-wants-to-get-phones-wifi-out-of-classrooms.ars>

7. <http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2011/05/council-of-europe-to-consider-ban-on-wifi-and-mobiles-in-classrooms.ars>

‘Lactose intolerance may sometimes be in the head, not the gut’

<http://www.healthfinder.gov/news/newstory.aspx?docID=652757>

‘Italian researchers report that some people who think they are lactose-intolerant may actually suffer from a psychological condition known as somatoform disorder.

‘With true lactose intolerance, a person is deficient in the enzyme lactase, which breaks down the lactose. Those who suffer it say they experience bloating, gas, gut pain and nausea when they eat or drink products containing the milk sugar lactose.

‘Somatoform disorder describes a group of conditions in which the physical pain and symptoms a person experiences are really related to psychological factors.’

Dr. Guido Basilisco from Milan presented research findings at Digestive Disease Week in Chicago in May.

‘In the study, Basilisco and his colleagues evaluated 102 patients, 77 of them female, who took a breath test commonly used to identify lactose intolerance. Patients also completed a questionnaire about somatization, anxiety and depression.

‘Those with somatoform disorder often report multiple problems in different areas of the body, such as faintness or weakness of a body part, Basilisco said, but no physical cause can be found.

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‘Either lactose intolerance or malabsorption was identified in 29 percent and 33 percent of patients, respectively.

‘However, when Basilisco looked at those with what he calls “altered somatization”, he found that “patients with altered somatization are four times more likely to report lactose intolerance”.’

XMRV does not cause chronic fatigue

<http://the-scientist.com/2011/06/05/xmr-v-doesnt-cause-chronic-fatigue/>

‘Two studies (1, 2) have cast further doubt on a 2009 report that a mouse virus is linked to chronic fatigue syndrome. The studies, both published Tuesday (May 31) in *Science*, point to lab contamination as the source of xenotropic murine leukemia virus-related virus, or XMRV, in cell samples from chronic fatigue patients.

‘As a result of these findings, both the scientific community and chronic fatigue patients “will ultimately have to accept the scientific proof that there’s just no hint of a connection to that disease,” Stephen Goff, a virologist at the Columbia University Medical Center in New York who was not involved in the study, told *The Scientist*.’

Sources

1. K. Knox et al. ‘No evidence of murine-like gammaretroviruses in CFS patients previously identified as XMRV-infected’, *Science*, DOI: 10.1126/science.1204963, 2011.
2. T. Paprotka et al. ‘Recombinant origin of the retrovirus XMRV’, *Science*, DOI: 10.1126/science.1205292, 2011.

Royal Society of Medicine online videos

Watch over 60 free videos on medical- and health-related matters online at www.rsmvideos.com.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Slips of the pen

Many readers will be familiar with Prokofiev’s ‘Lieutenant Kizhe’ theme, perhaps from Greg Lake’s song ‘I Believe in Father Christmas’, where it appears between the verses. What may not be so widely known is the fictional story of Kizhe, who was exiled to Siberia for breaking a window in the

Tsar’s palace but later had a distinguished military career and eventually a state funeral. Kizhe was, in fact, no more than a slip of the pen. A list of the names of officers had been hurriedly written out, and the Russian word *izhe* (‘also’), used by the scribe to introduce an added second set of names, was mistakenly joined up by a later hand

with an optional final *-k* in the last name on the original list. In this way an extra, imaginary lieutenant was included; he could then be blamed at convenience for any mishap.

Another such case, this time factual, once led to a premature press report concerning the sudden death of the then Bishop of Adelaide, who was surprised

when his office began to receive messages of sympathy. A Mr Bishop, of Adelaide, had found a dead ‘sea-monster’ on a beach. The telegram-style press release headline read BISHOP OF ADELAIDE FOUND DEAD SEA-MONSTER WASHED UP ON COAST OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, and a spurious break after *dead* led to its being treated as two separate items. The error is possible because *found* may be either the past tense or the passive participle of *find*. In another such case, the newspaper headline SOLDIER WHO DIED TWICE FAILED FITNESS TEST, in fact an abbreviated version of the sentence *A soldier who died had twice failed a fitness test*, was widely read as presaging a somewhat more surprising story!

Other cases involve printers’ notes being inadvertently type-set as parts of texts. In their fantasy novel *Good Omens*, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman exploit this phenomenon in their account of the ‘Bugger All This Bible’: an editor’s marginal scribbles complaining about his tedious work (on a sunny day which offers more entertaining activities out of doors) are later type-set in the middle of an Old Testament genealogy.

All this is very entertaining; but there is a serious issue here in respect of the interpretation of texts. Some scripts, especially those adopted or adapted from other languages with different structures, do not represent phonology (pronunciation) completely or unambiguously, and as a result ambiguity is rife in the texts in question. With ancient languages, no native speakers are now available, and clarification of such cases is often very difficult. This phenomenon can lead to damaging sentence-level ambiguity, as above; at word-level there are often several possible readings for a given series of characters. For example, the Cretan syllabic script ‘Linear B’, used to write early Greek, had apparently been adapted from a (known but undeciphered) script employed earlier to write what was probably a very

differently structured language, and its resources were inadequate for representing Greek syllables terminating in consonants. In consequence, many pairs/sets of phonologically distinct Greek words were written identically; for example, *pater* (‘father’) and *pantes* (‘everybody’) were both written with the same two characters, representing the syllables [pa] and [te]. Disambiguation in reading would have depended upon sentence grammar and semantic plausibility.

Ambiguity in the East

Another case of widespread ambiguity involves written Japanese, which consists of a mixture of ‘kanji’ (Chinese characters) and the smaller ‘kana’. The latter represent syllables, like Linear B characters, and are themselves, in origin, heavily simplified Chinese characters; they are used a) to represent the many Japanese grammatical elements with no equivalents in Chinese, such as the tense endings of verbs, and b) as ‘phonetic’ spellings of the syllables of (modified) foreign names, for instance *Ron-don*, ‘London’.

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Some kanji are read for their meaning. Thus the kanji meaning ‘person’ is the Chinese character representing the equivalent Chinese word, pronounced *ren* in Mandarin; but it is pronounced *hito* in Japanese. Others are instead read for their pronunciation; they were adopted to represent phonetically (fairly) similar Japanese words with completely different meanings. In addition, the same kanji have often been adopted into Japanese writing several times, and where a kanji is read for its pronunciation there may

thus be several **different** pronunciations, depending upon how the character was pronounced in Chinese at the relevant times. Some kanji have a reading for meaning **and** one or more readings for pronunciation.

The upshot of all this is that even adult Japanese are often unable to determine the pronunciations of unfamiliar written Japanese words, such as the names of minor towns far from their own places of residence; they have to choose by guesswork from a range of quite dissimilar possible forms, or else have no idea at all and are forced to learn the pronunciation by showing the written forms to locals. The obvious solution, writing place-names etc. in the phonetically unambiguous kana, has not been widely adopted. Japanese travelling in Japan (especially those who know some English) sometimes actually rely upon the roman-alphabet spellings (*romaji*) on road-signs, supposedly aimed at foreign visitors.

The Japanese writing system thus appears fiendishly complex; but the very high literacy rates in Japan suggest that in practice it is found quite manageable by native speakers. There has certainly been no impetus towards serious reform. Compare the case of English, where – as I noted a while ago in these pages – the high levels of irregularity and the much greater incidence of difficulty with spelling have prompted many calls for wholesale reform on the part of often inadequately informed enthusiasts.

In contrast, the application of Chinese script to Chinese itself is much less complex. But there is still an issue involving the fact that the pronunciations of characters in the various *fangyan* (‘dialects’) often differ radically; for instance, the character for ‘person’ is pronounced *yan* in Cantonese. However, the characters themselves, with their meanings, are shared; and literate Chinese who are not fully familiar with the dialect that they are attempting to speak can sometimes be seen drawing a character in the air in order to make their meaning clear.

(Indeed, as Chinese of all kinds has many homophones, the written forms can sometimes be useful even within one *fangyan*.)

Occasionally a given dialect requires a novel character for an element with no equivalent in Mandarin. Thus Cantonese has a dialect-specific plural marker pronounced like the English name of the roman letter D, and Cantonese-users (especially in Hong Kong, where many know some English) often write this item with a capital roman D (mainly in comic-books and such, where the cultural rule that written Chinese is

supposed to represent Mandarin usage does not apply).

Because of the uniformity of the characters, most Chinese people regard writing as basic and speech as secondary and imperfect. This creates an issue in linguistics classes. The modern 'western' intellectual perception of speech as basic is obviously valid cross-linguistically; after all, most languages which have existed have never been written, and everybody learns to speak before learning to read and write (indeed, even in highly literate societies some never learn to read or write). But

many Chinese students find this view alien and confusing. (Postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida have gone so far as to argue that writing is indeed more basic to language than is speech; but linguists are not impressed.)

Confusing script and language, some Chinese people are also tempted to describe **any** material in the roman alphabet as being 'in English' – including transliterated Chinese personal and place-names, and even Mandarin itself when written in the now widespread 'Hanyu Pinyin' romanisation.

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

ASKE 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.)

OF INTEREST

Online Course on Anomalistic Psychology

Goldsmiths College, London

From Professor Chris French:

'I thought I would give you all advance notice of a new online Anomalistic Psychology course that we anticipate will become available in January 2012. If the proposal is approved, an 8-week course will be offered by Goldsmiths College as a general introduction to anomalistic psychology, its methods and findings, with a view to demonstrating how psychological research seeks to examine and explain anomalous experiences such as "psychic" experiences, out-of-body and near-death experiences, hypnosis, alien abduction claims, etc.

'The course will be of interest to anyone with a serious interest in the scientific study of anomalous and 'paranormal' experience. Although prior experience of studying psychology will be an advantage, it will not be a course requirement, and prior knowledge of psychological research will not be assumed. The course will be offered fully online. Enrolled students will have access to online lectures and tutorials, reading materials, self-assessment exercises, and discussion forums. It is anticipated that the course will be non-credit bearing, although students who complete the self-assessment exercises and engage in the online discussions will receive a certificate of attendance. The course fees are not yet fixed, although

they are likely to be approximately £200.

'At this stage we are attempting to gauge potential demand for such a course to support our proposal to the College. If you would like to register your early interest in this course (without any obligation on your part), please send me an email (c.french@gold.ac.uk) giving your full name, country of residence, and a brief statement of your background and interest in Anomalistic Psychology.'

An Investigation of Ghostly Phenomena

From Dr Simon Sherwood, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Northampton:

'I would like to invite you to take part in an online survey that is investigating ghostly phenomena, the circumstances in which they are reported and the characteristics of people who have and have not experienced them. You need to be at least 18 years of age to take part but you do not have to have experienced ghostly phenomena; in fact I am keen to include people who have not had any such experiences.

If you are interested in taking part then please visit:

<https://survey.northampton.ac.uk/ghostly>

The Nightingale Collaboration

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

It is strongly recommended that you visit the Nightingale Collaboration website for updates on its latest activities against medical quackery and pseudoscience. Better still, sign up online for email copies of the Newsletter. At the time of writing, the penultimate newsletter features an interview with Professor Edzard Ernst who has announced his retirement as Director of the Complementary Medicine Research Group. Peninsula Medical School at the Universities of Exeter and Plymouth. The most recent issue (number 7) is a report on the campaign against 'Pseudo Science by Degrees'.

Rational Veterinary Medicine

(and other stories...)

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

This website, due to ASKE member Niall Taylor, 'provides a resource for those wishing to look at the evidence behind the claims of homeopaths and other practitioners of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). As would be expected from the title it has a veterinary slant, which is quite handy because one of the chief bogus arguments that homeopaths make is 'it works in animals' (it doesn't)'. Niall adds: 'The website is intended to be mainly a resource of citations with critiques and links for papers commonly cited in the CAM debate from both sides of the fence. Having to actually read all

the supposedly pro-CAM stuff is pretty soul destroying, it's all so weak and partisan. Any feedback gratefully received'.

Sense About Science

www.senseaboutscience.org

'The new Sense About Science website is now live. Many thanks to those of you who have spent time reviewing the site over the last week, your feedback helped us make a lot of improvements.

'We will be continuing the review process and adding more content over the coming weeks. It would be great to hear your comments once you've had a chance to explore:

- Can you easily navigate to find the things you normally come to our site for?
- And keeping in mind that the underlying structure is fixed, is there anything else you'd like to see included?
- If you spot any broken links, navigation problems, text that is unclear or formatting issues please let us know.

'You can tell us what you think using our feedback form:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/send-us-your-feedback.html>.'

Charles the Daft

Recently I was interviewed about British attitudes to the Royal Family for a US TV programme (*why you?* – Ed). How can one begin to explain? I imagine that since the later Victorian period the monarchy has tended to be off-limits when it comes to ridicule. But we continue the long tradition of mocking our princes and royal dukes, most of whom are automatically promoted, or promote themselves, well beyond the upper limits of their competence, which is not usually very high anyway. (To his credit, Prince William has yet to display any traits that would justify a scintilla of scorn or derision, and in this respect he takes after his grandmother.)

Sceptics themselves try to avoid *ad hominem* attacks when arguing against irrational, unreasonable and unfounded beliefs and practices, but occasionally

there is the odd (in more ways than one) exception.

Step forward that champion of nincompoopery, His Royal Highness Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, Duke of Rothesay (*get on with it* – Ed). Sceptics, will enjoy the lambasting given His Royal Highness by Nick Cohen of the *Observer* and the *Guardian* in an article entitled 'Prepare for the Reign of King Charles the Meddler'.

Here is a sample:

'[I] already knew that the heir [to the throne] was a mark for every type of homeopathic quack and new age conman, but never realised that he was an open target for cultists as well. His book [*Harmony*] shows nothing but contempt for the scientific method, seeing it as our curse rather than our salvation. He wants us to return to a pre-Renaissance world and find the shared 'sacred geometry' of the vagina in the designs of disparate ancient buildings.

'We must then look heavenwards and see mystical significance in the mean orbit of Mercury, which sits within the orbit of the earth in such a proportion that it fits exactly over the pentagon at the heart of the five-pointed star.

'It is the tale of *The Da Vinci Code* told by an idiot ...'

For the rest go to:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/01/royal-wedding-prince-charles>

Death of Sathya Sai Baba

From the heir apparent we move seamlessly to the Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba, who died on 24 April 2011. He had gathered a substantial following around the world (estimates range from 6 to 100 million), including political figures in India and well known Indian cricketers. He was well known for performing 'miracles' such as materialising jewels and trinkets, as well as 'holy ash'. There have also been two television documentaries, one in the UK and one in Denmark, alleging certain proclivities involving young male

followers, though these have never been substantiated in court. The BBC documentary (*The Secret Swami*) may be viewed at:

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3767740320034777862#>

One of many videos in which Sai Baba demonstrates his miraculous

powers (i.e. performs some simple conjuring tricks) may be found at the ECSO website <http://www.ecso.org/>

The 2011 Anthony Sampson Lecture

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2011/may/10/alan-rusbridger-libel-reform-speech>

Alan Rusbridger: 'The long, slow road to libel reform'

**KEEP LIBEL LAWS
OUT OF SCIENCE**

UPCOMING EVENTS

DENKFEST ZURICH

<http://www.denkfest.ch/en/>

Thursday 8th to Sunday 11th September
Zurich, Switzerland

Described as 'Four days of science, critical thinking & intelligent entertainment', with speakers from all over the world including, from the UK, Rose Shapiro, Edzard Ernst, Samantha Stein, and Chris French.

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

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

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.cfllondon.org/>

Who says that science has nothing to say about morality?

A video recording of this meeting, held on April 10 in Oxford, can be viewed at the above website.

'In his new book *The Moral Landscape*, neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris challenges the commonly held view that science has nothing to say about moral issues and that religion is the best authority on meaning, values and a good life. For Sam, the goal of 'The Moral Landscape' is to begin a conversation about how moral truth can be understood in terms of science. Richard Dawkins is known for his persistence in demanding a rational and scientific approach to solving life's most fundamental questions wherever and whenever it can be applied. So, can science help us to determine how we should live in the 21st century?...This is the first ever appearance of Sam and Richard together in public....This talk is brought to you by The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, UK, The British

Humanist Association, The Centre for Inquiry, UK, Oxford Atheists, Humanists, and Secularists, and Project Reason.'

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*.

'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..

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

PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

The 54th Annual Convention
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.

'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, or by phone: +44 121 204 3000 ext. 4318.'

For more details visit the above website.

SCIENTIFIC AND MEDICAL NETWORK

The Science of Empathy and the Spirit of Compassion

26th - 28th August 2011
University of Winchester

<http://www.scimednet.org/the-science-of-empathy-and-the-spirit-of-compassion/>

'The conference will focus on empathy and compassion through the lens of the emerging science of empathy, which is demonstrating that we are actually wired for empathy and compassion. Rather than seeing human beings as an outcome of the selfish gene, knowing that empathy potential exists at a neurophysiological level gives us a completely different understanding of human nature.'

Speakers:

Ms Karen Armstrong, Dr Valeria Gazzola, Prof Paul Gilbert Dr Iain McGilchrist and Mr Geshe Tashi Tsering.

Fees:

Residential: early bird £270.00 (en suite) or £240.00 (standard) booked by 15th June, otherwise £290.00 (en suite) or £260.00 (standard). Includes breakfasts, lunches and dinners.

Non-residential: early bird £205.00 booked by 15th June, otherwise £225.00. Includes lunches and dinners.

If you would like to receive a registration form by post, just send an email to: info@scimednet.org and include your name and postal address.

EXPLORING THE EXTRAORDINARY 3RD CONFERENCE

Friday 23rd – Sunday 25th September

Holiday Inn Hotel, York

<http://etenetwork.weebly.com>

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.'

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

I did not look up the answer and I struggled to think of a way of solving the puzzle. Fortunately, I had an enquiry on another matter from Mr Christopher Starr, a maths teacher and, rather cheekily, I asked him if he wouldn't mind having a look at the puzzle. Chris very kindly agreed and came up with the following solution, for which I am extremely grateful:

If there are two people at the party, then either they are mutual friends, or they don't know each other, so the statement is true for two people.

If there are three people then already the argument becomes a little complicated but bear with me. If you call them A, B and C then you have the following possibilities:

- A, B, C don't know each other, in which case at least two of them have the same number of friends
- A knows B, and A knows C, but B doesn't know C, in which case B and
- C have the same number of friends
- All three know each other, in which case at least two of them have the same number of friends.

Once you get to 4 people, it gets very fiddly, so consider this argument:

First of all, represent the four people by points A, B, C, D on a piece of paper, and represent 'friendship' by a line joining the two.

If the statement is false, then the first friend must have 0 friends, the second must have 1 friend, the third must have 2 friends and the fourth must have 3 friends (i.e. no 2 of them have the same number of friends). So, we could start by leaving A on its own, linking B to C, then C to D. In this case, A has 0

friends, B has 1 friend, and C has 2 friends (draw it and see!). Now try to link C to 3 people who haven't been linked up yet. You will find that it is impossible, so the statement must be true for 4 people.

You may also have noticed that if you try to do this, you will 'use up all the possible lines' on the diagram, i.e. there are 6 possible lines to link up, and also $0+1+2+3 = 6$.

What happens for 5 people at the party?

We require A knows 0 people, B knows 1 person, C knows 2 people, D knows 3 people, and E knows 4 people.

If you try to do this, you will once again find that you use up all the lines;

i.e. there are 10 available lines, and $0+1+2+3+4 = 10$.

This idea allows us to generalise. If there are n people at the party, then for the statement to be false, the first must know 0, the second must know 1, the third must know 2... the n th must know $n-1$. A couple of fairly basic arguments show that the total number of linkages and the total number of friends required is always the same in each case - actually $n(n-1)/2$. So, no matter how hard you try, you will never be able to link up the diagram so that each has a different number of lines coming from each point. Therefore, the only possibility is that at least 2 people must have the same number of friends.

This can also be solved more 'simply' using the 'pigeon-hole principle', but you have to know quite a lot of maths before you can understand the proofs.

Hope this helps! If you're not convinced, then have a go at the diagrams.

Chris also adds: 'It might be worth checking my solution with another mathematician, but I'm fairly certain that it's correct, even though it probably doesn't follow "established" methods'.

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
email: aske1@talktalk.net
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