

## THE SCEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER: NO. 1

### Introduction

When distributing documents or messages around the various people currently interested in helping to create a British association of sceptical enquirers, I have tended in the past to write personalised letters to each correspondent. Unfortunately, as the number of sceptics involved has increased, this has come to be rather a time-consuming activity, and so I have now decided to send a standard item to everyone. The title given to this circular was more or less the first thing which came to me mind; it has no claims to permanence.

### Sceptical newsletters

I have been moved to recast my communications into something approaching a newsletter by my reading of the periodicals of 10 American local sceptical groups. In general these periodicals are fairly short and cheaply produced, and consist of summaries of lectures; extracts and comments on news items; and letters. I see no reason why we could not produce something similar.

I have also recently been looking at specimens of the journals of the Cape Town, German, Italian, Spanish and Taiwanese sceptics. These vary rather widely in quality, and several have unaccountably been written in a foreign language. However, the German and Italian journals at least look very interesting indeed. The Italian journal 'Scienza & Paranormale' in particular is a very handsome production.

As I was feeling rather annoyed about my lack of access to this potentially fascinating and informative material, I decided to write to the European Council of Skeptical Organizations to find out more about the annual summary which they say they produce (I have a desperate hope it will be in English). I shall let you know what they say.

### Meeting in Stockport

A meeting has been arranged for 15 February 1997 in Stockport. The purpose of this meeting is to allow a few of us who live in the northern half of England the opportunity to meet each other and discuss some of the organisational and other issues that

confront us. Obviously, no decisions on collective matters will be made at the meeting; however, I hope that our discussions will produce a clear proposal for the structure of the association which can then be circulated to all interested parties for consideration.

At present, Anne Corden, Mark Gould, Tony Youens and myself propose to attend. Betty Howarth would have liked to attend, but unfortunately the date and location are not convenient for her. If anyone else would like to attend, please let me know.

Through the good offices of Steuart Campbell, Tony Youens has recently discussed our projected association with Wendy Grossman. A copy of this exchange is attached. As you will see, at one point Wendy says that she will consider attending the meeting in Stockport. Anne, Tony and I currently think that Wendy's views about the association are not very realistic, and we are not convinced that any useful purpose would be served by inviting her. However, a decision as to how to respond to her offer will not be made until we have received Mark's thoughts on the matter.

#### Meeting in Liverpool

Anne Corden, Mark Gould and myself are willing and able to travel to Liverpool to meet Betty Howarth and Dave Rogers. If Betty and Dave are interested, we should be grateful if they would advise us as to the venues and dates that would be convenient for them.

#### Meeting in the South

Doug Bramwell has mentioned that it would not be impossible for him to visit Michael Stanwick at some point. Would any other of our southern friends like to attend an informal get together? Expressions of interest to Doug please.

If a meeting in the south is arranged, I should like to think about attending. Mark me down as interested.

#### New respondents

Tony has recently received a letter from Neil Randall of Luton in response to a notice which we placed in the 'New Humanist' magazine. Both Tony and I have now sent replies.

Tony has also received a letter from Michael Heap of Sheffield. Although this letter enquires about Tony's (abortive) attempt to create a local sceptic's group, both Tony and I have invited Michael to help in the attempt to create a national association.

Incidentally, Michael is by no means new to matters sceptical: see Heap 1992 and 1995.

Heap, Michael. 1992. Science in Everyday Life. In J.W. Nienhuys (ed), Science or Pseudo. Proceedings of the Third EuroSkeptics Congress October 4-5, 1991, Amsterdam. Skepsis.

Heap, Michael. 1995. Surely There's Something In It? The Social Psychology of Healing. Skeptic 9(4): 9-14.

### The "Mars Effect"

Recently Michael Stanwick suggested that he and I write a response to a pro-astrology article which appeared in the November 1996 'Astronomy Now' (Seymour 1996). In this article the astronomer Percy Seymour suggests that although much of traditional astrology is nonsense, the work of Michel Gauquelin has demonstrated a neo-astrological connection between the position of certain planets in the sky and the times of birth of eminent professionals. He also suggests a mechanism whereby this effect can be accounted for. In brief: the tidal pull of a planet affects the sun's magnetic field, which in turn affects the earth's magnetic field, which in turn creates a resonance effect in the distinctive pre-natal nervous system of the eminent-professional-to-be, which in turn causes him to be born when the parent planet is in a certain position in the sky.

Although I have quite an extensive collection of material relating to the "Mars Effect", Michael and I decided that we needed to acquire a number of additional items before we could prepare a publishable critique of Seymour's claims. Regrettably, some of these items are somewhat obscure, and it would take us some time to obtain and study them. In view of this, we have had to abandon our rather belated idea of submitting a piece to 'Astronomy Now'.

Although it is too late to do much about Seymour's article, I have already started to hunt down the material which Michael and I felt we lacked. Once I have located it, I shall consider writing a summary of the various claims and counter-claims made in connection with Gauquelin's work for what I hope will then be the members of our association.

Seymour, Percy. 1996. Astrology: The Case For the Defence. Astronomy Now, November 1996: 43-46.

## Homeopathy

I recently heard that a new review of the experimental literature relating to homeopathy had been prepared and that this had concluded that evidence to support the claims made on behalf of homeopathic remedies does not exist. Enquiries made on my behalf by Mike Hutchinson suggest that the review in question was carried out for the European Commission (see here Abbott and Stiegler 1996). I have written to the Commission to ask them about their plans for publication. I shall circulate the response in due course.

Abbott, Alison and Gabor Stiegler. 1996. Support for Scientific Evaluation of Homeopathy Stirs Controversy. Nature 383: 285

## Alternative medicine

In recent years it seems to this observer that orthodox medical practitioners and scientists have grown somewhat reluctant to criticise unproven alternative remedies. In what I should like to think is the start of a reversal of this trend, the American Medical Association (AMA) has lately advised doctors that "it cannot recommend the use of alternative therapies for the treatment of the symptoms of menopause" (quoted in McDaniel 1997). Apparently, the AMA issued this statement as a result of a recommendation by the association's council on scientific affairs. "In its report the council said that its research found no scientific evidence to support the alternative therapies that it considered: vitamin supplements, dietary practices and exercise; homeopathy; herbal medicine; and visualization, hypnosis and relaxation procedures." (McDaniel 1997).

I tend to see most issues of the Journal of the American Medical Association a few weeks after they are published. If I come across a copy of the AMA's advice, I shall take a copy. Please tell me if you would like me to copy it to you in turn.

McDaniel, Charles-Gene. 1997. AMA Cautions on Alternative Therapies. British Medical Journal 314:94.

Finding in-depth critical appraisals of alternative medical claims can be difficult. For this reason, it is cheering to note that Prometheus Books propose to publish a peer-reviewed academic journal dedicated to just such material. Evidently, the journal will be called 'Reviews of Alternative and Anomalistic Medicine' and will appear sometime in 1997 under the editorship of sceptic Wallace Sampson. Lamentably, it seems that the individual subscription rate for this biannual journal will be a somewhat excessive \$85.00 per year.

## Telekinesis

Some parapsychologists claim that experiments on the ability of subjects to bias the output of random number generators have demonstrated that the mind can directly influence events at the quantum level. Intrigued by a report of one such experiment, Stanley Jeffers, a Professor of Physics and Astronomy at York University, Toronto with no previous involvement with parapsychology, decided to undertake a series of experiments into the parapsychologists' hypothesis. The experiments were designed with the assistance of James Alcock, a psychologist associated with CSICOP and a critic of some of the earlier random number generator experiments, whom Jeffers fortuitously discovered worked in the same university. The outcome seems to have been a particular tight protocol.

Briefly, Jeffers tested some 80 or so individuals, made up of students, self-professed psychics and martial arts experts. The results totally failed to disclose any telekinetic effects.

As I suspect that this work will be of interest to many of us, I have written to Professor Jeffers to ask him to send me a copy of any written report of his experiments he has written. I shall circulate his reply when it arrives.

## The Broadcasting Complaints Commission (BCC)

The BCC have replied to my request for information about their procedures and terms of reference. As you can see from the attached copy of their leaflet, their jurisdiction is quite narrow. As it was not clear whether a sceptical association as a whole, or its individual members, have the standing to bring a complaint against a programme on the paranormal, Anne Corden telephoned them and put those particular questions to them. They replied that an association probably could not bring a complaint, but individual members probably could. I am afraid that neither Anne nor I can square this with what the leaflet has to say on "Who can complain"; but perhaps we will just have to try a complaint or two and see how it goes.

One programme that may provide cause for complaint is 'Fortean TV' (Channel 4, 29 January and following Wednesdays). Another is....

## Beyond Belief

"Beyond Belief" is the name given to a series of live television farrago featuring Uri Geller. On 22 February 1997 ITV will produce a third instalment. Tony Youens proposes to attend the filming and report on it for us. If anyone else cares to go along, Tony can tell you how to obtain tickets.

### Chinese Pseudoscience

The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester is due to host a touring exhibition from the National Museum of Science and Technology in Beijing. The exhibition, called 'China - Cradle of Knowledge', will run from 7 February - 8 June 1997. According to the publicity leaflet, it will reveal "the secrets of China's discoveries and inventions which helped shape the modern world".

Alongside the exhibition the museum will present a number of events. I fear that some of these do not look auspicious. For example, the leaflet lists the following:

- 23 Feb      Lion Dancing, Qi Gong and Chinese Medicine
- 8 Mar        Feng Shui, Qi Gong and Wing Chun
- 24 Mar-     Medicine Week  
27 Mar
- 3 April     Calligraphy, Qi Gong and Meditation
- 29 May     Lion Dancing, Qi Gong and Chinese Medicine

I propose myself to attend at least one of these events to see what transpires. If anyone would like to join me, please let me know.

No doubt the exhibition will not dwell overlong on the failure of ancient Chinese proto-science to develop into modern science. To anyone wishing to consider the philosophical and social factors which conduced to this stagnation I would recommend the fine volume by Huff (1993). As for contemporary Chinese pseudoscience, Prometheus Books proposes to publish a book on this very subject soon (Lin et al 1997). Unfortunately, Mike Hutchinson informs me that difficulties with the translation from the Chinese are currently causing delays.

Huff, Toby E. 1993. The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West. Cambridge University Press.

Lin, Zixin et al. 1997. Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudoscience? Prometheus Books.

## "CVs"

I think that everyone who has expressed an interest in the idea of a sceptical association has been asked to provide a short piece about his or her interests, expertise, and thoughts on the organisation of the association. I should like to ask those who have not yet written such a piece to try and do so by, say, 7 February 1997. Until we have everyone's thoughts, the process of creating the association cannot move very much forward.

## Scientific American

The current issue of Scientific American (January 1997) contains three articles on contemporary anti-science. The articles are short, journalistic and rather superficial.

## Future issues of the Skeptical Intelligencer

I propose to produce future issues as and when the need to circulate material requires. Tony Youens has promised to send me any messages he receives from the e-mail hotline which James Randi operates, and I will attach these to the Intelligencer. If anyone else would like to insert items, please send them to me.

Of course, if the idea of a newsletter proves popular, we can see about improving the production values somewhat.