

"C.Vs"

Mark Gould, Michael Heap, Gordon Livesey and Dave Rogers have recently submitted "C.Vs". Copies can be found attached.

As you read the various C.Vs produced to date, you may be brought to wonder whether the views expressed are typical of sceptics. To the best of my knowledge, there has been little research into the opinions of self-identified sceptics. In fact the only study I am aware of is the recent survey conducted by the (U.S.) Skeptics Society. A copy of the results, as given in 1995 in Skeptic 3(4), is attached.

Stanley Jeffers

In the last issue of the Intelligencer I mentioned that I had written to Stanley Jeffers, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at York University, Ontario, for further information about a series of telekinesis experiments he has recently carried out. In reply Professor Jeffers has now sent me copies of 4 papers relating to his work. In addition, he has extended the following kind offer:

"I am originally from the UK and plan to be back for a visit in June. If you had a group that might be interested in a talk on some of this stuff let me know."

For myself, I think that this is an offer we cannot refuse, and I should like to arrange for Professor Jeffers to give a talk on his work whilst he is in the UK. As we are too few in number and too widely dispersed to make up much of an audience, I have made some preliminary enquiries as to whether it would be possible to arrange for Professor Jeffers to give a talk at a university. The results so far:

- a. Michael Heap has said that it should be possible to arrange something at Sheffield University.
- b. Tony Youens has said that it may be possible to arrange something at the University of Nottingham.
- c. Christopher French (Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Goldsmith's College, University of London) has said that he is willing to include Professor Jeffers on Goldsmith's College's list of invited speakers.

- d. Toby Howard (co-editor of the Skeptic) is looking into whether Manchester University could host a talk.

If anyone else is in a position to offer a venue, I should be grateful if they would let me know. In the meantime, I have written back to Professor Jeffers expressing our interest in hearing him talk and enquiring as to which part of the country would be most convenient for him. I shall keep you informed of developments.

As regards the papers sent by Professor Jeffers, one of these (McCrone 1994) is a New Scientist article which mainly discusses the telekinesis work of Robert Jahn (Professor Jeffers's experiments are described in a 5 paragraph inset), while the other three are papers authored or co-authored by Professor Jeffers himself. The abstracts for the latter papers are as follows:

"Some interpretations of quantum mechanics assert an active role for human consciousness in actualizing the results of measurements on quantum systems. At the same time, some empirical studies have claimed positive results in testing the abilities of human subjects to bias randomly generated events i.e. those governed by Gaussian statistics. Experiments have been conducted using a different probability distribution i.e. the digitally recorded diffracted light intensity from a single slit. This normalized distribution is conventionally interpreted as the probability of locating a photon in a specified location in the observation plane. Human subjects have been invited to attempt to bias this distribution in a prescribed way. The experiment is tightly controlled against any artifacts generating very high data rates with high statistical accuracy. Calibrations show that any displacement of the diffraction pattern relative to the detector of order  $1.6 \times 10^{-5}$  cms should be detectable. Of twenty subjects tested, none has produced a detectable displacement corresponding to this upper limit." (Jeffers and Sloan 1992)

"It has been claimed that physical processes which are essentially probabilistic in nature can be affected in a marginal but statistically highly significant manner by different states of intentionality assumed by humans who attempt to interact with the physical system without any sensorimotor contact. Physical processes previously used in such studies include radioactive decay and the counting of random pulses from a diode source. The levels of

significance claimed for the reality of these effects is of the order of many millions to one against chance. Typically appeals are made to quantum mechanics to provide a theoretical basis for these claimed effects. Experiments have been conducted that are essentially quantum mechanical in nature i.e. optical diffraction and interference experiments. These experiments yield high data rates and are carefully controlled against any artifacts. Extensive testing using the diffraction apparatus has not yielded any evidence in support of the claims. A double slit experiment is currently being implemented for use in experiments of this type. The rationale for its use and calibration data obtained to date are described." (Jeffers and Sloan 1994)

"The original account of the famous double slit invoked the Heisenberg Uncertainty Relations to assert the impossibility of simultaneously observing interference fringes with 100% contrast and determining, with absolute certainty, through which slit the particle actually passed. This was asserted to be true given that the interaction of the photon of light used to illuminate the particle would disturb the path of the particle by imparting its momentum to the particle. Recent two beam interference experiments have been carried out in which, in principle, path information may be obtained without introducing any uncontrollable disturbance in the interfering beams in the sense implied by the Uncertainty Relations. However, any attempt to extract this information from the experimental apparatus does in fact result in the reduction of the contrast of the interference fringes. Thus the Principle of Complementarity has a deeper foundation than the Uncertainty Relations. It follows that, if it were possible, by any means, to extract path information from a two beam interference experiment then this would be manifest in a reduction of the contrast of the fringes. A double slit experiment has been conducted in which participants have been invited either to exert their intentionality in consciously directing the energy preferentially through one path or to abstract at any time the nature of the energy flow. Success at either task would be indicated by a drop in the fringe contrast. This experiment could then in principle detect any anomalous transfer of information from the interferometer to the observer or if the intentionality of the observer has affected the nature of the energy flow in the interferometer. Results to date do not indicate any consciousness related effects." (Jeffers 1996)

If anyone would like copies of any of these papers, I should be grateful if they would send me an A4 sized SAE.

McCrone, John. 1994. Psychic Powers: What Are The Odds? New Scientist 143: 34-8

Jeffers, S. and J. Sloan. 1992. A Low Light Level Diffraction Experiment for Anomalies Research. Journal of Scientific Exploration 6(4): 333-352

Jeffers, S. and J. Sloan. 1994. Optical Diffraction and Interference Experiments As Potential Indicators of Anomalous Phenomena. Paper presented at the first "Towards a Scientific Basis for Consciousness Conference", University of Arizona, April 1994.

Jeffers, S. 1996. Intentionality and Complementarity: What Might The Double Slit Experiment Tell Us About Consciousness? Paper presented at the second "Towards a Science of Consciousness" conference, University of Arizona, April 1996

### A talk by Tony Youens

Recently, Tony Youens gave a talk on 'Psychic Deception' to 18 women at the Women's Institute at Norbury, near Ashbourne Derbyshire. Tony began by discussing the nature of scepticism and the scientific method on which it largely rests. He then demonstrated various conjuring tricks and the techniques of cold-reading. To leave his audience pondering, he closed with a pseudo-psychic trick which he declined to explain.

Tony reports that he enjoyed the experience, and that he was generally well-received. However, he suspects that some of his listeners did not find the process of disillusionment an entirely pleasurable one.

### Technical consultants

In issue number 1 of the Intelligencer I mentioned that Michael Stanwick and I were looking into the causal mechanism for planetary effects hypothesised by the astronomer Percy Seymour. As part of this investigation, Michael telephoned Anthony Garrett, a physicist who has written two critical reviews of Seymour's book. During the conversation, Anthony Garrett said that in general he is prepared to provide us with assistance on any technical matters within his competence. He also said that Dr. David Fisher, a physicist at the University of Cardiff, would probably be willing to do likewise.

It seems that Anthony is willing and able to engage paranormal believers in public debate. This may be something which we would wish to bear in mind.

Evidently both Anthony Garrett and David Fisher regard themselves as hard-nosed sceptics. However, Anthony has stressed that he is a Christian. He would not wish to see our association venturing into those transcendental matters sometimes regarded as the province of faith.

### Jean Meeus and Percy Seymour

Jean Meeus is a Belgian astronomer who some years ago criticised the claim, advanced by John Gribbin and Stephen Plagemann in their 1972 book 'The Jupiter Effect', that a alignment of the sun, earth and planets in 1982 would lead to the destruction of Los Angeles by earthquakes (for more on this and a related claim entertained by Gribbin, see Frazier 1980, Roder 1984 and Friedlander 1995). As there are some points of similarity between the mechanisms posited by Gribbin and Seymour, Michael Stanwick asked Jean Meeus for his comments on Seymour's ideas. In a reply dated 2 February 1997, Jean criticises certain points made by Seymour. However he also says "I must confess that reading such stuff makes me sick!...Certainly I do not want to read Seymour's book. I am doing astronomy (since more than 50 years) because I like it, and reading pseudoscientific stuff would make me very unhappy." This may seem less than ideally open-minded, but I have every sympathy for Jean Meeus's position. When a cursory examination of a claim strongly suggests that it is minimally plausible, it is by no means easy to persist with a study of it. I for one do not blame those who simply turn away in disgust to more promising work.

Intriguingly, John Gribbin is now on the editorial board of the Skeptic, the journal of the (U.S.) Skeptics Society. It would be interesting to know how he views the Seymour hypothesis.

Frazier, Kendrick. 1980. The Jupiter Noneffect. Skeptical Inquirer 5(1): 6-7

Roder, Wolf. 1984. The Gribbin Effect. Skeptical Inquirer 8(3): 252-7

Friedlander, Michael W. 1995. At the Fringes of Science. Westview Press

### The Skeptics Society

One organisation that I think deserves to be more widely known amongst British sceptics is the Skeptics Society of Altadena, California. You can find attached an extract from the Society's magazine Skeptic which describes the Society and its work. As you will see, the range of subjects of interest to the Skeptics Society is somewhat broader than those embraced by many other sceptical bodies and publications. In view of Anthony Garrett's

comments, it is interesting to note that the Skeptic sometimes ventures into controversies between religious believers and unbelievers. For example, a recent issue featured a series of articles on possible naturalistic foundations for morality.

The Skeptic Society's magazine, *Skeptic*, is probably the largest sceptical journal in the world, and at 110 or more large pages an issue, it is around twice the size of the *Skeptical Inquirer*. In my view the articles vary a great deal in quality. At their worst, they can be trite and poorly informed. At their best, they can be stunningly good. As an example of the latter I would cite Harris (1994), a 37 page monograph of the causes of Aids that is quite simply one of the best pieces of semi-popular science writing I have ever read.

To subscribe to *Skeptic*, it is necessary to join the Skeptics Society. If one agrees to automatic renewal of membership through a credit card, this currently costs \$50 per year.

Harris, Steven B. 1994. The Aids Heresies: A Case Study in Skepticism Taken Too Far. *Skeptic* 3(2): 42-79

#### The International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR)

Another body worthy of notice is ISCLR. ISCLR studies 'modern' and 'urban' legends, plus any other legends circulating actively. It publishes two periodicals: an annual refereed academic journal called *Contemporary Legend*, and a quarterly newsletter called *FoafTale News* ("FOAF" stands for "friend of a friend").

One can get a flavour of the interests and approaches characteristic of ISCLR from the current issue of *FoafTale News*. At one extreme is a sober 5 page article on a rumour-panic concerning allegedly satanic activities that struck Northeastern Pennsylvania in late 1996. At the other is a short account of a legend about the injuries supposedly sustained when sex play with a gerbil led to an explosion of methane (I shall leave your imaginations to work out the details).

Not everyone associated with ISCLR is entirely sceptical, and indeed there appears to be a wing of the folklorist community that regards the debunking of at least certain types of popular paranormal beliefs as unacceptable. In general, however, the tone tends to be one of mild scepticism, and sceptics will, I think, find ISCLR's material both informative and entertaining. I would particularly recommend ISCLR to anyone interested in allegations of satanic activity. Here the contributors to ISCLR's publication are well-informed and extremely sceptical.

To join ISCLR send a cheque for UK£10, made out to "ISCLR", to Paul Smith, Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland, CANADA, A1B 3XB. Subscriptions to Foafale News and Contemporary Legend are included in the membership charge.

I should warn you that ISCLR is plagued by problems with its printers. These have repeatedly interrupted its publication schedule in recent years.

#### European Council of Skeptical Organisations (ECSO)

I have received a second letter from the Chairman of ECSO. A copy can be found attached.

In reply to my lament about foreign language sceptical journals, Betty Howarth wrote to me with some good news:

"In my working life I had considerable experience as a technical translator, and can deal with French, German, Spanish, Italian (and Russian, if you ever hear from any Russian sceptics): Taiwanese unfortunately not! So if you want to know what any of these foreigners are on about, pass the papers to me - guaranteed fast, accurate and no finger-marks!"

#### Australian Sceptics

Dave Rogers and Mark Gould have recently sought advice on setting up a sceptical organization from the Australian Skeptics. Copies of the relevant replies are attached.

#### Giorgio Piccardi

Through their Internet web page, the Australian Skeptics recently asked for assistance in answering a question put to them about the relevance of the work of Giorgio Piccardi to theories of human evolution. Briefly, Giorgio Piccardi was a Professor of Chemistry at Florence University whose experiments led him to believe that the chemical reactivity of various substances (e.g. water) varies over time, and that this variation may be the result of extraterrestrial radiation.

Piccardi's work is frequently cited by apologists for astrology as supporting the view that astrological influences are not physically impossible in principle. Although such an argument does not logically demonstrate that the particular forces and effects posited by astrology exist, I have wanted for some time to enquire into the soundness of Piccardi's work. When, therefore, the request for assistance by the Australian Skeptics came to my notice, I asked Michael Stanwick if he would assist with such an enquiry. He agreed to help.

To date we have not progressed very far - Piccardi's work is a somewhat arcane branch of chemistry, and obtaining reliable material relating to it is not easy. In view of this, if anyone in our nascent network knows anything about the scientific standing of the work of Piccardi and his successors, or thinks he or she may have relevant background knowledge, we should very much like to hear from them. Please contact Michael Stanwick.

#### Stockport Meeting

The meeting in Stockport will take place at the Puss in Boots public house, Nangreave Road, at 2pm on 15 February 1997.

#### A meal with the editors of the Skeptic

Some time ago Toby Howard, one of the co-editors of the Skeptic suggested that we arrange a "skeptics curry night out" at a Manchester restaurant. I have recently reminded Toby about this idea, and he is now going to discuss suitable dates and venues with Steve Donnelly, the other co-editor of the Skeptic. I shall keep you informed of developments.

#### Alternative medicine

In the first issue of the Intelligencer, I complained about the reluctance of medical scientists to criticise alternative medicine. One area that is occasionally subjected to critical evaluation is that of alternative cancer treatments, and in recent months I have read two unflattering articles on this branch of pseudoscience. The two articles are Aulus 1996 and Baum 1996. Aulus's article is a sensible but short contribution to an excellent special issue of Scientific American on cancer. Baum's piece is not quite so good, he having been unfortunate enough to learn his philosophy of science at the feet of Karl Popper.



Since reading Aulus's piece I have obtained a copy of one of his references: Brigden (1995). I would recommend this fine article as a starting point for anyone interested in alternative cancer remedies. Those with access to the internet may also wish to note that Aulus refers to what looks like a useful source of reliable scientific information on this area: the Boston University Medical Centre alternative cancer treatment Web site at <http://web.bu.edu/COHIS/cancer/about/alttx/about.htm>.

If anyone is looking for a sensible exposition of the philosophy of science, I would recommend CSICOP Fellow Bunge's recent (1996) work. Although Bunge's book focuses on the social sciences, it contains a great deal of interesting and sensible general material on the philosophical foundations of science.

Aulus, Jean-Jacques. 1996. Alternative Cancer Treatments. Scientific American 2

Baum, Michael. 1996. Quack Cancer Cures or Scientific Remedies. Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine 89: 543-775(3): 126-7

Brigden, Malcolm L. 1995. Unproven (Questionable) Cancer Therapies. Western Journal of Medicine 163(5): 463-9

Bunge, Mario. 1996. Finding Philosophy in Social Science. Yale University Press

### New response

I have received a new response to our notice in the Skeptic. It comes from Charles Dietz of London. Charles has been sent the usual pile of material. A copy of his letter is attached.

### Fortean TV

The first episode of Fortean TV was broadcast on Channel 4 on 29 January 1997. As I was unimpressed with certain aspects of this production, I sent a letter of complaint to the Independent Broadcasting Commission. It will be interesting to see what results ensue.

If anyone would like to see my letter of complaint, I shall be happy to send a copy on request. Briefly, I complained about the failure to refer to the evidence which tends to suggest that the deaths attributed to the "goatsucker" have mundane causes. I also complained that the programme failed to examine the extent to which the therapeutic claims made for the Surgeon Fish meet the evidential requirements laid down by medical science.