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SPECIAL ISSUE:

DELUSIONAL AND ANOMALOUS BELIEFS

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Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should take care to ensure that texts are temperate in tone and free of vituperation. They should also ensure that arguments are either supported by express evidence/arguments or identified as speculative. 'Do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.' (T.H. Huxley).

Before being accepted for publication, submitted texts will be reviewed by the Editor and any appropriate advisors. Where improvements or changes are desirable, the editorial team will work with authors and make constructive suggestions as to amendments.

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- *Chapters*: Griff, P. (1978) Creationism. In D. Greengage (ed.) *Pseudoscience*. Boston: Chapman Publishers.
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EDITORIAL

Mike Heap

A man in shabby attire holds forth with great fervour to anyone prepared to listen that he is the reincarnation of an Egyptian Pharaoh and shortly will be reinstated on the Egyptian throne. Nobody seems the least bit interested until a nurse calls him to come and take his daily medicine. Meanwhile, another man dressed in a colourful costume is insisting with equal passion that he knows that the Creator of the entire universe does not want women on the planet Earth to be priests. He addresses a great audience of wise men and women and his pronouncements are relayed to the nation on the evening's television newscast.

What is it that determines that the first man is deluded and the second man is rational? The more I think about it the more the answer eludes me.

With this conundrum in mind I have devoted this issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* to the subject of delusions. I am grateful to the Editor of *The Psychologist* and the author himself for permission to reprint Chris French's article on Anomalistic Psychology and to Professor Cornelis de Jager and Jan Zahradil MP for permission to reproduce their papers from the 10th European Skeptics Congress. Also thanks to Brian Robinson for his very prompt comments on my paper.

ARTICLES

WHY I STUDY ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

This article originally appeared in *The Psychologist* (published by The British Psychological Society), July 2001, p.356-357.

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A few months ago I received an e-mail from a mature student wondering if I could explain various terrifying experiences that she had endured repeatedly for almost 20 years. On exchanging a few e-mails, it became apparent to me that she was suffering from occasional bouts of sleep paralysis. This is a temporary state where an individual who is either drifting off to sleep or emerging from sleep suddenly realises that their muscles are totally paralysed. This is frightening enough, but the state is sometimes associated with bizarre and terrifying

imagery of demons, monsters, hags or aliens, and a strong sense of a malign presence.

Although there is need for a lot more research into this fascinating phenomenon, we know enough about sleep paralysis for me to be able to offer reassurance to this sufferer that neither was she going mad nor was she the victim of nocturnal supernatural assaults. Sleep paralysis is a common symptom of narcolepsy, but many non-narcoleptics suffer from sleep paralysis at least

once in their lives. A recent survey at Goldsmiths College, for example, showed that about 40 per cent of first-year students had had the experience.

In this particular case the student involved was immensely relieved to know that she was not alone in having the experience and that it had no long-term implications for her mental health. She confessed that she had always been afraid to discuss the matter with others through fear of ridicule and rejection. Poignantly, she felt that she 'had lost so many years' through not having understood the phenomenon earlier in her life.

Not everyone welcomes such explanations for their unusual experiences (*Editor's note: see article by M. Heap in this issue*); many cling to the idea that their similar episodes are the result of alien abduction or poltergeist attacks. Given that people are generally much more likely to be exposed to such paranormal notions than the idea of sleep paralysis, this is perhaps not surprising. People need to make sense of anomalous experiences, and a paranormal explanation is probably seen as preferable to the notion that they are losing their sanity. Once a paranormal explanation has been accepted, it provides various secondary gains (such as a sense of being special) even though the sufferer may be genuinely afraid of further 'attacks'.

Sleep paralysis is one of the phenomena dealt with within the subdiscipline of anomalistic psychology. This area of study attempts to explain paranormal and related beliefs and ostensibly paranormal experiences, in terms of known (or knowable) psychological and physical factors. It is directed at understanding bizarre experiences that many people have, without assuming that there is anything paranormal involved. While psychology, neurology and other scientific disciplines are rich with explanatory models for human experiences of many kinds, 'models are rarely extrapolated to attempt to explain strange and unusual experiences. Anomalistic psychology attempts to do just that.

The paranormal may be defined 'alleged phenomena that cannot be accounted for in terms of conventional scientific theories'. The definition adopted by those working in this area typically goes beyond the core phenomena of extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, and life after death; it includes such topics as belief in astrology, UFOs, dowsing, the Bermuda Triangle, and so on. It should be noted that the aims of anomalistic psychology would still be valid even if the existence of paranormal forces were to be established beyond doubt, because there is little question that most paranormal claims can be plausibly explained in non-paranormal terms.

As with most other researchers, my main motivation for working in my chosen field is simply that I find it fascinating. I can think of no other area of study within psychology that covers such a broad range of inherently interesting (and controversial) topics. At one extreme the issues raised in anomalistic psychology are the most profound known to humanity. Are there really paranormal forces at work in the universe? Does consciousness survive the death of the physical body? At the other extreme are more trivial, but highly entertaining, topics such as the methods used by con artists to fool people that they have genuine psychic powers.

This range and variety makes anomalistic psychology an excellent tool for the teaching of critical thinking skills. Students opting for my final-year option on psychology, parapsychology and pseudo-science are obviously interested in the topics even before the course begins. For most of them, however, their exposure to information on such will have been via the media. Such coverage has a strong bias, for obvious reasons, but for people it is a major source of information.

One of the aims of my course is to address the issue of why some sources of evidence should be treated as more reliable than others. Students are offered alternative explanations for paranormal experiences; a variety of psychological factors, most notably the limitations and biases of human

cognition, can lead to the drawing of faulty conclusions.

Although anomalistic psychology adopts the working hypothesis that paranormal forces do not exist, it allows for the possibility that this assumption might just be wrong. Most self-professed sceptics are not very well-informed about (or even interested in) parapsychology. They assume that all apparently positive evidence in favour of psi (i.e. paranormal influences) must be the result of delusion, deception or incompetence. The history of parapsychology does provide many examples of all three (as does the history of psychology).

However, the techniques used by experimental parapsychologists have certainly become much more refined and sophisticated in the light of previous criticism. It is simply not the case that parapsychologists are all amateurs when it comes to experimental design. Many of the most sophisticated experimental designs within parapsychology are easily on a par with the best psychological studies. Furthermore, some parapsychologists appear to produce evidence in support of the existence of paranormal forces even from such apparently well-controlled experiments. Either such findings should be accepted at face value, or critics should attempt to specify the subtle methodological flaws that are producing the misleading results. This is not an easy task, and any lessons learned in this way will certainly benefit both parapsychology and psychology.

Opinion polls repeatedly show that the majority of the general population do endorse paranormal claims, and a sizeable minority claim to have had direct experience of the paranormal. There are only two possibilities. One is that at least some of these anomalous experiences really do reflect the operation of paranormal forces in our universe. If this is the case, the sooner this truth is accepted by the wider scientific community, the better. Such acceptance would have profound implications for our scientific world view and for our understanding of our place in the universe. On the other hand, it may be the case that we can explain all aspects of

anomalous experience in terms of knowable psychological and physical factors.

At first glance, the fact that all known societies, both geographically and historically, have embraced paranormal beliefs of various kinds might be taken as evidence for the reality of the paranormal. Upon reflection, however, it may be that this exemplifies the simple truth that we are all psychologically and biologically more similar than we are different. A full understanding of the psychology of anomalous experiences may tell us a great deal about more typical human experience in the same way that understanding the processes underlying visual illusions can tell us a great deal about normal visual perception.

So paranormal beliefs have real implications for the behaviour of the majority of the world's population. The media devote a huge amount of time and effort to presenting the case for the paranormal. Millions of dollars are spent every year by those who feel that their spiritual quest can be satisfied by embracing paranormal claims. But to date, many psychologists have adopted a narrow-minded view that such topics do not merit serious study and have had nothing to say on them (with a few notable exceptions, such as Susan Blackmore, Richard Wiseman, and Bob Morris and his team in the UK, and Nicholas Spanos, Elizabeth Loftus, and Steven Jay Lynn in the USA).

Fortunately, there are signs that this is beginning to change. The number of papers in respected peer-reviewed journals on these topics has shown a steady increase over recent years, as has the number of books. The American Psychological Association recently published an excellent edited collection of reviews in this area (Cardena et al., 2000). Symposia on these issues are no longer a rarity at international conferences. Courses on such topics are finding their way into more and more psychology degree programmes.

It is for all these reasons that I have recently established the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit here at Goldsmiths College. The Unit provides

a focus for the considerable amount of relevant research already taking place in the department, as well as facilitating further expansion and international collaborative research.

Those who attempt to explain away the paranormal are often criticised by believers for being closed-minded. For me, being closed-minded equates to an unwillingness to consider the evidence relating to a particular claim. Attempting to consider all the possible alternative explanations for a particular phenomenon and accepting the need to produce empirical evidence for one's favoured hypothesis is not being closed-minded. If non-paranormal explanations for some allegedly paranormal

phenomenon cannot be found, this implicitly supports the case for its reality. But non-paranormal explanations will be found if one looks for them. If such explanations are found, we will have learned important truths about human nature in the process. Either way, we cannot lose.

Reference

Cardena, E., Lynn, S.J. & Krippner, S. (Eds.). (2000) *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND BELIEFS IN ANOMALOUS PHENOMENA

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Aims

In this paper I shall discuss what I consider are similarities between the attitudes of psychiatric patients to their maladaptive or delusional beliefs and the attitudes of individuals to experiences which they attribute to anomalous or paranormal phenomena. It is not my contention that the latter are suffering from a psychiatric disorder; rather I wish to consider whether there are common underlying processes.

The Construction and Interpretation of Sensory Information

To approach this question, I shall start by considering in simple terms some important characteristics of the way the human brain processes information from external and internal

sources and thereby enables us to consciously experience the world as complex and meaningful. Superficially it appears to us that our brain receives information in a passive manner, as though the immediate receptors of this information are pre-programmed to recognise instantaneously complex chunks of information that correspond to the stimuli involved. For example, we instantaneously recognise written and spoken words, faces, pieces of music, foods, odours and so on and in fact, unless we withdraw our attention from them, we often find the act of recognition virtually impossible to resist.

Despite this, it is clear that while there are receptors and nerve cells that are specialised to register fundamental aspects of the sensory input in the various modalities, the greater the complexity of the information to be recognised, the more the brain is

involved in an active process of construction. One hypothesised process has been termed 'analysis by synthesis' (Neisser, 1967) whereby a match is found between a sample of the sensory input and an existing template constructed by the brain.

Major influences on this process are redundancy and expectation, which collectively enable us to attend to an abridged sample of the input, although we thereby increase the risk of errors should the information be contrary to our expectations. An everyday example of this is reading: we do not attend to each individual letter or even word, and not uncommonly we misread what is there owing to false expectations. Also of relevance are the cognitive biases associated with emotional states such as anxiety, which will be described later in this paper.

All of this is akin to hypothesis testing, but normally it is contrary to our subjective impression of our perceptual experiences, which seem so immediate. We become more aware of it when the sensory input is unusual, fragmented or degraded in some way. Everyday examples are when we are trying to identify something in the dark or a very faint object, decipher somebody's handwriting, or recognise an unusual sound. 'Is it X? No, it doesn't look or sound like X. ... Is it Y?..... No. Z? Oh yes, of course, it's Z'.

This process of generating hypotheses is exploited in puzzles such as 'Find the hidden objects in the picture', 'What is this familiar object from an unfamiliar angle?' or 'Guess whose voice this is?' Certain visual art forms also evoke this at a conscious level.

The process is fallible and one consequence is that it is relatively easy for people to perceive meaningful stimuli that are not really there (as in ink blot tests) or create patterns when there is only random noise – visual or auditory. Another consequence is that we can be remarkably good at leaping to correct (or incorrect) conclusions from very limited perceptual input. For example, I see a momentary flash of red and luminous green

reflected in the glass of the picture above my fireplace and I immediately make my way to the front door in anticipation of the postman. Or consider this example: 'Have you had a good day?' a mother asks her young son, as usual, when he arrives home from school. 'Yes' he replies, as always. But the almost imperceptible delay in his reply, or the slightly lower-than-usual eye gaze, or whatever, leads Mum to conclude that he has probably been in trouble again. Or this one: In the middle of the night I hear a sudden sharp noise and immediately conclude that the hook that I stuck on the bathroom wall has just fallen off.

All of these conclusions are hypotheses that can be actively tested by further observation. In the third example, I get up and go to the bathroom, only to find that the hook is still stuck to the wall. My hypothesis is falsified. Had the hook been on the floor, my hypothesis would have been supported, but not proved; the noise might still have been caused by something else. All of this is Karl Popper applied to everyday life, even if he may not have accurately represented the scientific method (Gardner, 2001).

This process of construction, matching and hypothesis testing also characterises memory and is again more consciously accessible when the information – in this case the memory traces – is fragmentary. Thus: 'What was that woman's name? Doris? ... No. Dora? – No. Dorothy? ... Yes, of course'. Or 'How does that melody go?' etc.

Hypothesis construction and testing in the case of internally generated stimuli or activity is also exemplified by our making sense of physical symptoms, including pain. Thus, 'Is this indigestion, heart failure, cancer?', a process known as 'attribution'.

Constructing Hypotheses from More Complex Information

We can extend this discussion to the cognitive processing of information more complex than simple stimuli. Suppose that Fred comes home one

day and makes these observations. The door is not locked, the answerphone is switched on and there is no sign of Fred's wife. On the kitchen floor are several carrier bags full of food items. The hypothesis that Fred comes up with first is that his wife has just arrived back from shopping and has popped into the neighbours' house with something she promised she would pick up for them.

Some years ago there was a fascination for a certain type of puzzle in which people would be given an unusual scenario and, by a series of questions requiring 'yes' or 'no' answers, deduce the explanation or the antecedents of the situation described. (I vaguely recall that one of them was about a one-legged man who receives a parcel through the post, takes it out to sea on a boat, opens it, laughs, and drops the contents of the parcel, a human leg, into the sea.) In fact in the early 1960s there was a television quiz in which a panel of celebrities was similarly challenged by members of the public who had what at first appeared to be rather unusual experiences. I recall two these, one of which was not at all interesting. The other went as follows: the person in question opened her front door one morning to be confronted on the doorstep by a lavatory brush and a saucer of milk. The show, incidentally, was called 'What's it all About?' In this case the panel quickly homed in on the answer, namely that on returning home in the dark the night before, the person saw an object on her doorstep which she perceived (i.e. hypothesised) to be a hedgehog and she very thoughtfully gave it a saucer of milk. The next morning, as a result of further observations, the lady constructed the most likely hypothesis that the brush had fallen out of the bathroom window above the front door while she was out the previous night.

The processes involved in interpreting the information illustrated in the above examples are continuous with those previously mentioned that govern the perception of very simple meaningful material, and again they become more apparent when the material is fragmented and incomplete.

So far this is a simplified overview but one that is sufficient for present purposes. A final point to emphasise is that an important part of the above process is that we are able to give some consideration to the relative likelihood of various interpretations, again based on what is already known about the world and our ability to reason. Similarly we are able to acknowledge that we are fallible and may be wrong on many occasions, even when we think in the most rational way, since our interpretation of any event may be based on limited information and may be contradicted by further evidence.

Constructing Hypotheses concerning Anomalous Phenomena

From the above discussion, it is no surprise that most reporting of anomalous phenomena occurs under the conditions described above: viz. ghosts, UFOs and unusual creatures such as the Loch Ness monster, Big Foot and large cats in the United Kingdom; likewise, instances of what are more rationally classified as 'cold readings', e.g. by astrologists, tarot card users and mediums. Thus, in the dark and under restricted viewing conditions, a moving observer may misinterpret, say, a planet as a saucer-shaped flying object moving at fantastic speed. Compare with this someone given the following information from a medium: 'I have a man here who is holding his chest. I am getting a name beginning with J or G – is it Joe or George? He is talking about the garden. Can anyone help me with this one?' Here again, we have ambiguous and fragmented information about which the observers (members of the audience) are required, if they can, to construct a hypothesis.

Let us analyse in greater depth these processes. One assumption I shall make here is that amongst the unique characteristics that human beings possess is that they are capable of being rational and, by nature of that fact, they are capable of being irrational. (It may be possible to demonstrate to a limited degree something resembling both qualities in some of the higher primates, but I am

focusing here more on the cognitive rather than behavioural manifestations.)

I have so far argued that as humans we habitually perceive and make sense of our environment (including internal stimuli) according to rules that are rational, logical and not dissimilar to those characteristic of the scientific method. We construct hypotheses that are consistent with the evidence provided by our senses, and test them in a logical manner, falsifying or supporting them. Moreover, we construct hypotheses that, from our experience, provide the *most likely* explanations in a manner consistent with Occam's Razor. In the example I gave earlier of my hearing a noise in the night, I do not immediately deduce that a friend has just called in for tea; when Fred comes home to find his wife is absent, he goes for the most likely hypothesis first – that she has popped into the neighbour's – rather than immediately infers that she has run off with the milkman or, less likely in Fred's case, that she has been abducted by aliens.

And yet, we do not always think and act in this rational manner. I once heard an amusing story of two girls who were playing tennis and one of them lost her contact lens. As they were both crouched down pawing the ground, an elderly lady who was passing by called out 'Are you looking for this?' and held up a tennis ball.

We all make mistakes like this and psychologists have demonstrated how all of us can misperceive or be irrational in quite basic ways. I believe that this is why we should be sceptical of the support offered for unusual claims that goes 'Fred Higgins is a down-to-earth Lancastrian who is not easily fooled...' or even 'Amongst the observers of the UFO was Flight Lieutenant Reginald Mainwaring with 25 years' flying experience...'. Not long ago a sighting of a puma-like cat was made in Nottinghamshire by a vet who declared, 'I ought to know the difference between a large cat and a dog'. In fact the most salient attribute common to all these people is that they are human beings, and human beings are fallible, particularly when they perceive stimuli under restricted viewing conditions.

Nevertheless, failure to arrive at rational conclusions and beliefs is not simply due to a lack of competence or oversight. Irrationality – meaning here any departure from the rules of hypothesis construction and testing – occurs in predictable ways. Very often there is some purpose or advantage for us, although this is not always apparent. One obvious reason for departing from the rules is wishful thinking: we seek out and interpret evidence in the manner that suits us. Our own selfish interests make us prejudiced.

It is not hard to conclude that this is happening when someone is being given, by a medium, messages supposedly from a departed loved one. This indeed illustrates one of the principles of cold reading. Sceptics (*see for example the article in this issue by C. French*) also often assume that believing that one has had an extraordinary or paranormal experience is valued in itself and people will be biased to some extent to perceive and interpret certain events accordingly, and to resist disconfirming evidence.

I postulate also (and cognitive dissonance theory predicts) that publicly declaring such a belief will in itself render a person reluctant to accept more likely explanations and the evidence for such. This is something that could be investigated systematically. I would, for example, predict that someone who declares that he or she has just seen a tiny pony in a nearby field would be more accepting of the possibility that what he or she saw was the farmer's new wolfhound, than someone who declares that he or she has just seen a puma in the field. ('I do know the difference between a cat and a dog, and that was no dog!')

More deep-seated beliefs about the world tend to be particularly resistant to disconfirming evidence. One reason may be that there are good adaptive reasons why we are reluctant to change our beliefs. We need predictability, consistency, and familiarity. Our beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and assumptions provide us with that. They enable us to view the world in a more orderly and predictable way. In that way we are less anxious. Consequently, we are

prejudiced: we tend to interpret information and to behave in ways that will confirm or, at least, not disconfirm our beliefs.

To return to our consideration of the person who declares that he or she has had an unusual or paranormal experience, another reason for the tenacity of that belief, even in the face of more likely, but mundane, explanations and disconfirming evidence, is that we value having such experiences and believing in their authenticity. Life is thus more exciting and offers many more possibilities; perhaps we are even special in some way. The reader may be acquainted with the 'Ah, yes but' mind set of those who are reluctant to consider more reasonable explanations for their unusual experiences. A few years ago a 'UFO' was sighted over the Sheffield area by a number of people, some of whom phoned the local TV station. The reports were studied by the news team who realised that the description of the UFO was identical to that of a telecommunications instrument that hovered over a local stadium. That evening on the local TV news, one of the newscasters rang a lady who had earlier described to them what she had seen. The newscaster simply informed her that what she had sighted was certainly the device in question. But she wouldn't have it! 'No, that's not what I saw', she said and then, very significantly, declared, 'and do you know, since I saw it, it's changed my whole life!'

Now it may be that what this lady saw was indeed an extraterrestrial craft. But it seems that she had somehow lost the ability to consider the relative likelihood of the various hypotheses that she could construct to explain her observation. This is an oft-noted characteristic of claims of anomalous sightings. Recently I saw a television programme promoting the existence of an unknown giant bear in Siberia. The commentator stated that one man who claimed to have seen it was unlikely to have misidentified a common brown bear because of his years of experience hunting these creatures. Here we have two hypotheses: firstly that a hitherto unknown giant bear is alive in Siberia or, secondly, an experienced hunter made a mistake. Both are

unlikely, but which is the less likely on the available evidence?

The 'Psychotic Process'

There is one more process that I wish to discuss, namely how unusual beliefs may become progressively more elaborate, often in exponential fashion. Let us first recapitulate. The starting point is information that is unclear, incomplete, and ambiguous. We then have a belief that this indicates something unusual or even supernatural. A declared commitment is made in the authenticity of the belief (possibly because it is personally valued by the believer).

Beliefs thus acquired demand relaxation of the usual constraints that govern rational thinking. One risk of this is that the door is thus open to further unusual ideas and beliefs, which may all-too-readily seek admission. The restraints are down and the boundaries widen further and further to accommodate claims that are increasingly more unusual and bizarre. The adherents of what has now become a belief system find it difficult to 'blow the whistle' and declare 'Wait a minute! Stop! This is crazy! We've gone wrong somewhere!'

Why this can happen is as follows. To sustain the original claim or belief, new information has to be interpreted accordingly. This is akin to making facts fit the theory. Similarly, new claims tend also to be accepted as authentic. For example: somebody sees a flying object and, in the absence of any obvious explanation, declares it to be an extraterrestrial (ET) craft. Other similar sightings are reported, thus supporting the original hypothesis that ET beings are visiting the earth. Someone then claims to have actually seen an ET craft on the ground. Hence these ET beings are now landing on Earth. Another observer actually sees figures that she interprets as ET beings themselves. Now they are amongst us. Someone claims to have interacted with them. Someone then claims to have been taken on board an ET craft and someone else ... and someone else ... etc. until eventually hundreds of people are claiming to have been thus

abducted. Somebody then claims to have observed evidence that millions of people have been thus abducted. A massive epidemic of alien abductions is declared. Later, people report that ET beings have conducted surgery on them and interfered with their reproductive organs and a belief develops that women abductees are being used to breed ET beings. Some 'abductees' claim to have had pieces of metal implanted in them. And so on and on and on The belief system spreads, seemingly with no boundaries and nothing to check its growth and no restraints on what ideas and claims attach itself to it. Contrast this with the development of scientific theory, with its strict rules of accountability that ensure a process of self-correction according to the evidence and the application of logic and mathematics.

Now, I have no doubt that at some stage some individuals are going to draw the line and deny the credibility and authenticity of some of the claims that are being made. But the problem is that there are no clear rules for determining what is most likely to be authentic and what is otherwise. Hence, once you start to question, say, the belief and the evidence that women are being reproductively programmed by ET beings, where does your doubting stop? Just as when one starts to pull at the loose thread of a garment, so when one starts to question these claims, the whole belief system is in danger of unravelling all the way back to the original claim that ET crafts are flying around Earth.

Elements in the above process are evident in varying degrees in everyday life. A not dissimilar process is at work in the case of claims and beliefs that are driven by fear, as in mass hysteria. Extreme examples characterise the belief systems of cults, particularly where the cult is physically separated from mainstream society. But of greatest relevance here are the kinds of unusual beliefs that are of interest to sceptics. As well as UFOs, major examples are claims of ritual satanic abuse, multiple personality disorder, and crop circles (for which, with increasing complexity of the patterns, explanations more elaborate than UFO landing sites have had to be provided to preserve the claim

for their extraordinary nature). In the case of alternative medicine we can likewise see the difficulties that adherents have in accepting some but not all of the methods that claim to be 'natural and holistic'; for if one rejects, say, crystal healing and colour therapy, why should one not also reject homeopathy and acupuncture?

Where a belief system becomes increasingly complex in the above way, I believe that the label 'psychotic' is not inappropriate, at the very least by way of analogy to the thinking of psychotic patients who have delusional beliefs. But more of this later. Right now it is worth observing how adherents of the kinds of beliefs in question often need to resort to the incorporation of 'paranoid' ideas into their system. This is usually necessary to account for the dearth of good evidence or the refusal of experts in mainstream disciplines or in 'the establishment' to take seriously the beliefs in question. 'There is a government cover-up' is a common assertion by UFO advocates. In America, the CIA has been cited as being in cahoots with the False Memory Foundation and the backlash against the diagnosis of multiple personality disorder. The medical establishment is often cited as being involved in a conspiracy against alternative medicine. Of course, some unusual belief systems are entirely based on the idea of a conspiracy.

Summary

I have been discussing the nature of unusual beliefs. I am particularly interested in beliefs based upon unusual interpretations of everyday experiences. I have asserted (although more systematic evidence is required on this) that people are reluctant to disclaim such ideas and beliefs. Individuals are biased to interpret further information and events in a manner that is consistent with the belief (even when logically this evidence opposes it). One occasional consequence of this is what I have termed a 'psychotic' process, namely a reluctance or inability to disclaim related beliefs and assertions that may become increasingly bizarre over time. Finally, 'paranoid' attitudes may be expressed in the face of

a lack of acceptance of the beliefs in question, notably by orthodox and authoritative persons and organisations. These processes are potentiated when unusual beliefs are actively shared by groups of individuals, and at the extreme we have the phenomenon of cults.

Irrational Beliefs Characterising Psychological Disorders and Mental Illness

It is my contention that the processes identified above not uncommonly represent the thinking of normal individuals who are not necessarily suffering from any form of psychiatric disorder. But what about people whose ideas and beliefs are unusual to the extent that they are defined as suffering from a psychological disability or even as being mentally ill? Such individuals interpret their experience of their external world and their own internal experiences (thoughts, images, memories and physical feelings) in extremely unusual ways that may be part of a far-reaching belief system.

If we define mental disorders as those that are currently classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV) or the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) then we have a considerable range of human problems, only the most serious of which we would refer to as 'mental illness'.

Psychological disorders and irrational thinking

Over the last 30 years, the psychological treatment of such disorders has been greatly influenced by the cognitive approach. This endeavours to understand the thoughts and beliefs of people with mental disorders because usually it can be shown that these are erroneous, unfounded, unrealistic or irrational. If one can help clients and patients to acquire more realistic beliefs (i.e. hypotheses) about themselves and their world, then their emotional and behavioural problems may accordingly ease.

Consider the following:

- Nita is absolutely terrified of thunder and lightning.
- Joe washes his hands at least 100 times a day; he believes that if he did not do so something terrible would happen.

In their rational moments, Nita and Joe would probably acknowledge that their fears are unreasonable. However, they will act as though they are true. Part of therapy will be to help them adopt more realistic beliefs when they are beset by their fears. Another is to encourage them to test out their beliefs in reality; for example Joe could be prevented from washing his hands, thus allowing him to find out if anything terrible does happen. These two methods constitute much of what is termed cognitive-behaviour therapy. The latter method is similar to the process of hypothesis testing by performing an experiment.

- David has panic attacks during which he believes he will faint or even have heart failure.

In this case David can be said to have constructed a 'catastrophic' hypothesis from the evidence of his physical experiences. In contrast to Nita and Joe, David may seriously believe that his fears are well founded. Sometimes a patient may need some advice and factual information to help correct their erroneous beliefs. So it is important that David understands that there is much evidence to show that, in a healthy person, a panic attack does not cause fainting or cardiac arrest. However, it is important that David test his initial hypothesis against the one offered by his therapist by performing an experiment in which he remains in a situation in which he is panicking and discovers whether he does indeed faint.

The tenacity of unreasonable and maladaptive beliefs

- Mahmood believes he is completely worthless and unlovable.
- Jason is very depressed because he is bald.

Just as Nita and Joe may be able to accept that, despite their persistence, their fears are completely unrealistic, Mahmood may be able to tell himself that in reality he is highly qualified, has a successful career, is a dutiful husband and father, has never broken the law, and so on. Yet still he disparages himself. In contrast, Jason may well insist that he is correct in his belief that his baldness is a severe handicap for him, that other people think less of him for it, and that the key to his happiness is acquiring a fine head of hair. Despite his therapist's efforts to encourage him to challenge his ideas about his baldness and to consider the relevant evidence, Jason may prove extremely resistant to what ought to be welcome news.

- Maria is convinced that she has cancer and will die in the next few years, despite the lack of symptoms and despite extensive tests that have proved negative.

So far, one difference between the beliefs of these people and beliefs in paranormal experiences is that the former are mainly personal, whereas the latter relate more to the nature of the external world. Another difference is that the beliefs of these patients appear to be unwelcome and destructive for the person concerned, whereas, as I have argued, in many (but not all) cases, paranormal claims are highly valued by their advocates. Nevertheless, as I have illustrated with Jason, it is not necessarily easy to persuade all of the above patients that there are more realistic and constructive ways of thinking. For example, hypochondriacal patients, 'somatisers' (those whose psychological problems tend to be manifested as physical symptoms), and illness phobics (such as Maria) when given the physical 'all clear' do not necessarily perceive this as a cause for celebration. Not uncommonly they may devalue the evidence, calling into question the doctors' competence, or finding loopholes such as 'I was feeling OK when they did the tests' or in the case of one somatiser I saw, 'They took blood out of my right arm but the pain is in my left arm'.

Even poor Mahmood may be peculiarly resistant to the evidence that he has at least as many positive attributes and as few negative ones as most people. 'They don't really mean it' or 'They are just saying this to please me' may be his stock answers when it is pointed out to him that other people express admiration of his positive qualities.

Patients such as Mahmood, Jason, David and Maria are predisposed to interpret every incident or event as evidence in support of their beliefs. For example, if someone laughs in Mahmood's vicinity, he may immediately conclude that that person is surely laughing at him because he is so stupid; likewise Jason may conclude that his appearance is being ridiculed. As soon as David notices his heart rate has increased, he believes that he is going to panic and faint. When Maria has a headache, to her it is a clear sign of a brain tumour.

In fact beliefs that are associated with high levels of fear or anxiety predispose us to two cognitive biases. Firstly, with increasing levels of anxiety we allocate more attention to information that is perceived to be potentially threatening. Secondly, we are increasingly prone to interpret information in a threatening way. (There is a sub-group of individuals, called 'repressors', who tend to do the opposite, but these will not be discussed here.) These cognitive biases have adaptive value; that is, they favour survival. However, one theory (Eysenck, 1997) is that anxiety disorders arise through a positive feedback loop, whereby anxiety generates these attentional and interpretative biases, which generate further anxiety and so on. Thus the anxiety spirals out of control. A panic attack is a good example of this, the cognitive biases being concerned with bodily processes, likewise illness phobia.

This model explains why ill-founded and irrational beliefs that generate anxiety, and are therefore not valued by the person, can nevertheless, especially when the anxiety level is already high, be held with unshakable tenacity and are resistant to rational influences.

The hidden value of irrational and maladaptive beliefs

Sometimes one cannot help but come to the conclusion that the persons concerned may have some reason, perhaps even unknown to themselves, for holding onto their beliefs. For example, it may somehow be psychologically less threatening for Maria to assume the sick role than to be pronounced healthy and able-bodied. With patients such as Jason, it is possible that, rather like Mahmood, they constantly feel unfulfilled and afflicted by unhappy and anxious feelings and therefore construct their own explanations or hypotheses about these experiences, in Jason's case that it is his baldness that is handicapping him. Jason's distress now becomes more understandable to him, likewise the solution to his distress. Hence, whilst he and, for that matter, Maria, in no way value their fear, distress and unhappiness, they may be said to value, and indeed overvalue, their beliefs or hypotheses as to why they feel this way. Hence it is not easy for them to entertain the possibility that there may be other, more personal, explanations for their dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Overvalued delusions

- For two years Sean has been in love with Donna whom he sees at his local pub. Despite the fact that they have hardly spoken to one another, he believes that she has also been in love with him all this time too.

Here we have an obvious case in which there can be no doubt that the person values his beliefs.

It is these kinds of delusional beliefs that I find are often most similar to paranormal beliefs or belief systems. Not uncommonly, the thoughts, feelings, communication and behaviour of the patient appear quite normal and rational when he or she is not engaged in the subject matter of his or her delusions. Otherwise, such patients will be completely impervious to any suggestion, evidence or reasoning that he or she may have got things wrong. They will be alert to and interpret any scrap

of evidence as supporting their theory, even when it obviously contradicts it, and will not be prepared to consider that a different interpretation is possible. For example, when Sean writes Donna a letter asking him to meet her somewhere and she does not turn up, it is evidence that she feels the need to test his love for her. When she looks upset next time he walks past her in the pub, clearly it is because she is in love with him, but is not yet able to commit herself; something or someone is holding her back. An ex-boyfriend confronts Sean and explains that Donna is not interested in him; clearly this person is jealous of Donna's love for him. Sean overhears Donna at the bar saying in a loud voice 'I need more time'. Clearly this message is directed at him and not at the group of people she is with. And as for her choice of record on the jukebox when Sean is present – 'Just wait a little longer' – this says it all.

It makes sense to speculate (and again the theory of cognitive dissonance predicts this) that the more a person commits himself or herself to a belief, the less easy it is for him or her to disengage from it, particularly when that commitment is manifested in action. People have harmed themselves and others, and even committed murder, on the basis of their delusions. It is plausible to consider that having thus acted upon their deluded beliefs, the people concerned are less likely to disclaim them when they are refuted by reason and evidence.

Other examples of delusional beliefs

- Stephan believes he has uncovered a global economic conspiracy by western governments and as a consequence government agents have him under surveillance.
- Joe believes that he is being harmed by a ghost that was put in his television set when the man from Radio Rentals came to repair it.

Indeed, the staff of the local Radio Rentals shop have become very concerned about Joe's visiting them and haranguing them to do something about this.

- Alfred believes there is a conspiracy against him by the British Army, and when he hears men whistling he believes that they are agents of the army who are shadowing him.
- Although she has no symptoms, Dawn believes that she is pregnant and has been so for the last 18 months.

My impression is that generally the more unusual or irrational the belief, the greater the tenacity with which it is held by the person. Direct challenges to the belief may provoke hostility and, in the case of certain delusions, psychiatric staff may be perceived as being part a conspiracy or persecutory network. For example, Dawn may conclude that the refusal of psychiatric staff to support her belief in her pregnancy implies that they are in cahoots with the medical doctors who have denied her claims.

- Raj hears voices that he believes are demons sent by Satan to goad him into committing wicked acts.

There are a number of theories about auditory hallucinations, one being that they are simply the result of aberrant neurophysiological activity. However, an understanding that has informed cognitive-behaviour therapy in helping people cope with their voices is summed up by the expression 'misattribution'. The principle problem is that patients construct sinister and frightening hypotheses concerning these internal cognitive experiences, often attributing them to external persecutory agencies, rather than their own thought processes. This formulation then opens up the possibility of using cognitive-behaviour therapy to assist the patient in constructing more rational hypotheses about his or her experiences.

- Karl believes he is 200 years old, can see into the future, and is the reincarnation of King Arthur.

There are patients whose thinking is so disorganised that it is virtually impossible to engage in any meaningful dialogue with them. When one sits down with someone who is floridly deluded, like

Karl, and listens to his or her story, one often has the experience, analogous to turning on a tap; an endless stream of bizarre and irrational ideas and nonsense comes pouring out. Indeed one may wonder whether there is any limit to this and whether the details are not being simply generated on the spot rather than being representative of the person's existing daily pre-occupations. It is unusual to have this kind of extreme experience with a non-patient with a paranormal belief system, but it does happen. (I have to say that listening to interviews with Mr David Icke reminds me of my experiences with such patients. For this reason I find it distasteful that he has been used as fodder for chat-show entertainment, one presenter even gleefully remarking, 'But people are laughing *at* you, not *with* you'.)

More commonly in the non-patient population, the flight of ideas is more organised and coherent, and the ideas themselves are accepted and valued by others. However, as previously stated, one still has the impression of the lack of some kind of critical regulation of the ideas being entertained.

Irrational and Delusional Thinking and the Truth

On what grounds are we entitled to assert that any or all of the above people are mistaken in their beliefs? This is a fair question. So far, I have talked, in admittedly simplistic terms, about a failure to apply rational thinking to the available evidence and the need to test hypotheses that are constructed on the basis of the available evidence. However, one can apply rational thinking to reliable evidence and thus arrive at the most likely interpretation and still be completely wrong. It may even be that the *least* likely hypothesis is the correct one. In such cases, this should become apparent as further evidence accumulates. For example, in due course, Maria's doctors may detect the presence of a brain tumour or Stephan's insistence that there is a global economic conspiracy may be vindicated. Thus, one may be irrational but correct.

At this juncture it should be emphasised that 'having irrational beliefs' on the one hand and 'having a psychological problem or disorder' on the other are not one and the same. This is indeed one of the central points that I am making in this paper. It is usually only when the person starts to suffer, or cause suffering to others, that we say that he or she is a 'case'. Otherwise, Stephan, Joe, Dawn and so on are quite free to hold onto their beliefs without having the ministrations of the mental health services offered to or inflicted upon them. Hence having a psychological disorder or being 'mad' is not synonymous with thinking irrationally.

For example, one may argue that we are not entitled to dismiss Stephan's theories as irrational even if they make no sense to us. Some would even argue that truth is relative and the world that one individual constructs for himself or herself is as valid as that of any other individual. Suppose, however, Stephan starts to believe that members of his family have been indoctrinated by the government and are part of the global conspiracy. Now he interprets things that they say and do, and have said and done in the past, as evidence that they are part of the conspiracy. Naturally he alienates himself from them, and his wife and children thereby suffer. Suppose, quite naturally again, he seeks to defend himself against them by physically attacking them in a serious way.

At what point in this chain of events do we identify Stephan's thinking as irrational? Not necessarily when he becomes 'mad'; most likely he has not been thinking rationally for a long time as he has developed his world conspiracy theory.

Conclusions

Even at quite basic levels, each one of us constructs his or her experience of the world and comes to his or her own understanding of it, in a manner which is not dissimilar to that of the scientific ideal. That is, the hypotheses we construct are based upon what experience and logic has told us are the most likely to be true and

we test these hypotheses in the way that helps us to support, modify, or refute them.

This is the ideal but it is not as simple as it sounds. When I have given talks on scepticism I have often found myself stating that 'Truth' – that is, true, reliable knowledge about the nature of the material world – is very difficult to come by. Indeed, I believe that this is a pivotal, but usually only implicit, tenet of scepticism. It applies not only to science but also to all academic and applied disciplines that form part of the 'tree of knowledge'. It also applies to information about the wider world that each one of us acquires through his or her education and, especially, through the media. Much of the latter is cheaply gained and hence unreliable and often, in large measure, false. It is often commented how much our beliefs and opinions are simply based on illusions. We perceive the world 'through a glass darkly'; this is so, even for our knowledge and understanding of our immediate world that we receive through our senses and we encode in memory.

That we all fall short of this ideal is probably, most of the time, of little detriment. In fact, perhaps in a manner analogous to spontaneous errors in genetic material, it may even be a good thing that we deviate from the rules. Life can thereby be more interesting and exciting and we may be more creative and even make important insights and discoveries that we might otherwise miss were we always to adhere rigidly to the rules. Our greatest mistakes are made when we do not acknowledge our fallibility; that is, when we are unwilling or unable to consider that our observations may be unreliable and our hypotheses incorrect, and that there are alternatives that may be true and even more likely to be so. Likewise we fall short when we unduly bias our interpretation of sensory information and internal experiences to support our existing hypotheses.

These 'mistakes' are made by all people, whether or not they hold paranormal beliefs and whether or not they have psychological problems, mental disorders or mental illnesses. What interests me is

how much these mistakes may characterise the thinking of patients with even the most serious mental illnesses. In this respect they may not differ as much as we like to believe from other people who have unusual beliefs. Certainly the statement 'I am not mad!' adds little authenticity to any claim that the person has witnessed a supernatural or anomalous phenomenon.

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COMMENTS ON 'PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND BELIEFS IN ANOMALOUS PHENOMENA'

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I completely agree with Mike in emphasising that 'having irrational beliefs' is not necessarily at all the same as 'having a psychological problem or disorder'. I write as a psychiatrist who is often called upon to assess, under Section 12 of the Mental Health Act, members of the public whose behaviour has made them conspicuous one way or another, to see whether or not they are suffering from mental illness 'of a nature or degree' sufficient to require compulsory admission to hospital for treatment, I have often said to the person's relatives or friends that people can and do frequently believe all sorts of things, and it needn't concern us unduly that they should do so. But what should and does concern us is the *effect* that a belief may have on how that person *feels and acts*.

I frequently say something similar to patients themselves in the course of an ordinary psychiatric interview, when they are protesting their right to a particular belief and what they consider to be their justification for holding it. That is, in general, when I

am doing psychiatry, as distinct from being a member of ASKE or anything else, I tend to focus not on the content of a particular patient's belief but on the effect it has, or may have, on that patient and on others. Dealing with *patients* that way tends to avoid unproductive confrontations and helps to promote and maintain a therapeutic alliance. (Of course I must be aware of the content of the patient's belief system and of its potential for development, but that is a different matter.)

I should also like to mention something that seems to me to be corroborative of Mike's position on the relationship between high levels of fear or anxiety and certain cognitive biases. Like most psychiatrists, I prescribe medication designed to treat, amongst other conditions, delusional disorders of various kinds, and I want to approach the questions Mike addresses from a biochemical viewpoint.

The brain works by releasing chemical messages, called neurotransmitters, one of which is dopamine. Neurotransmitters work by 'binding', attaching themselves, to receptor cells, e.g. D-2 receptors. The so-called anti-psychotic drugs, or neuroleptics, work by binding to the same sorts of cells in a similar way. They can thus block (or in other cases enhance) the actions of different neurotransmitters. For many years it has been considered that since all neuroleptics block the dopamine system in the brain, and as they are beneficial in psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, 'therefore', so it was thought, there must be something wrong with the dopamine system of patients with these disorders.

However the psychiatrist David Healy, in his very readable and informative book, *Psychiatric Drugs Explained* (Mosby, 2nd Edition, 1997) points to the lack of evidence for any malfunction of the dopamine system in these patients. Nevertheless these drugs do appear to work, in that patients taking them often stop thinking in a delusional way, or else the emotional intensity with which they hold their beliefs is greatly diminished.

Healy takes the view that neuroleptics are not specifically 'anti-psychotic' or 'anti-schizophrenic', but, 'What binding to D-2 receptors appears to do is to produce a feeling of indifference, a sense of being shielded from stress, a 'who cares' feeling that many people under stress find immensely useful. ... The tranquillisation they produce is (*not like that caused by Librium, Valium or alcohol but*) much more a case of finding oneself not getting worked up ...'

It seems to me that this is saying something along the same lines as Mike is, coming at it from a cognitive position.

The only other point I'd like to make is that it can sometimes be so difficult to know who's 'mad' and who is simply being fashionable.

R. D. Laing, in the middle of the last century, made attempts to show that people with delusional and disordered thinking, in particular those diagnosed

as suffering from schizophrenia, were in some sense actually being 'logical', even 'sane'. They were, he thought, adopting a perfectly comprehensible strategy, an attempt at 'living an unliveable situation', typically, in Laing's interpretation, surrounded by family members whose verbal and non-verbal communications were routinely ambiguous, or self-contradictory (the classic 'double bind'). As a result, such people would find themselves continually, and continuously, invalidating themselves. The result, so Laing thought, was what society defined as madness.

The corollary of this is that it was others in a person's immediate family and, by extension, the society from which that family got its values and beliefs, the whole world even, who were 'mad'. The unfortunate patients were, Laing and his circle tried to maintain, actually the sane ones.

Speaking loosely we often do refer to society, or the world at large, as 'mad'. There might be a sort of borderline area where it is not so easy to differentiate between ordinary 'irrational beliefs' and 'mental illness', and maybe here the line we draw is moveable. In classical psychiatry the point was regularly made that the important thing about the definition of the word 'delusion' was that the belief had to be out of keeping with the prevailing belief system of the surrounding society. This meant, amongst other things, that theologians and priests were safe from being carted off to hospital. (You are allowed to mutter quietly to yourself if you are praying to God, but not if you are responding to auditory hallucinations.)

So what is 'mad' may vary from place to place and epoch to epoch. Like many other notions it may be socially constructed. The American philosopher John Searle has written, in *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), of those social institutions and entities, which have real effect in the world, that exist to a large extent simply because people *believe*, or agree to believe, that they exist. He asks, 'How can there be an objective world of money, property, marriage, governments, elections,

football games, cocktail parties and law courts in a world that consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force, and in which some of these particles are organized into systems that are conscious biological beasts, such as ourselves?’

He writes, ‘... for social facts, the attitude that we take toward the phenomenon is partly constitutive of the phenomenon’. He considers a US 20 dollar

bill: ‘When the Treasury says it is legal tender, they are *declaring* it to be legal tender, not announcing an empirical fact that it already is legal tender’. When a psychiatrist, acting from within a certain society, makes a statement about someone’s mental health or disorder, is that psychiatrist behaving like the US Treasury? Is madness an empirically real thing, or rather just a social fact?

OUR DELIGHTFUL DELUSIONS

Talk given at the 10th European Skeptical Congress, Prague, 9 September 2001.

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The Wisdom of Folly

Nearly five centuries ago, in 1511, Desiderius Erasmus, of Rotterdam, but truly *Européen avant la lettre*, published his book ‘Stultitiae Laus’, translated into ‘The Wisdom of Folly’ (Hudson, 1945). Erasmus was one of the forerunners of the great cultural revolutions that took place in the beginning of the last half millennium. His book was conceived during a voyage on horseback from Italy to England and was dedicated to his friend Thomas Moore.

Its contents are a severe criticism of the world of his days. Not without reason his criticisms were formulated in an indirect way. As the author of the book he introduced a woman called Moria (Greek for folly, but also a little joke at the expense of Moore). Women were, in his days, considered more innocent and less wise than men. She was dressed as a mediaeval jester, in the fool’s dress with the fool’s cap. The character of the book is stressed in the final paragraph, where he says: ‘If anything that I have said seems too saucy or too

glib, stop and think: “’tis Folly, and a woman that has spoken”. But of course, you will also remember that Greek proverb, “Even a foolish man will often speak a word in season”, unless, perhaps, you assume that this does not extend to women.’ That way he made his criticism acceptable to the rulers of his days. Or stated otherwise, he pulled the weapons out of the hands of his potential enemies. This was certainly necessary, because his criticisms are, in some places, extremely severe.

To give an impression of the character of Erasmus’ work consider the following quotations. (*Chapter numbers refer to the original numbering in the Latin version of the book; Hudson (1945) introduced a different numbering.*) First a fairly airy one (Ch. 45):

‘But it is a sad thing, they say, to be deceived. No. The saddest thing is not to be deceived. For they are quite beside the mark who think that the happiness of Man is to be found in things as such; it resides in opinion. For such is the obscurity and variety of human affairs that nothing can be clearly known ...’.

Here Erasmus reveals himself to be an early sceptic.

His criticism of the church is in some places outspoken, as shown by this quotation from Ch. 45:

‘Finally, the mind of Man is so constructed that it is taken far more with disguises than with reality. If anyone wants to make a convincing and easy test of this, let him go to church and listen to sermons. If something solid is being said, everyone sleeps, or yawns, or is ill at ease. But if the bawler – I made a slip, I meant to say prater – as they so often do, begins some old wives’ tale, everybody awakens, straightens up, and gapes for it.’

There are more places where the church is attacked (cf. Ch. 66):

‘The Christian religion on the whole seems to have a kinship with some sort of folly, while it has no alliance whatever with wisdom.’ A few lines further:

‘Then you will notice that the original founders of religion, admirably laying hold of pure simplicity, were the bitterest foes of literary learning. Lastly, no fools seem to act more foolishly than do the people of whom zeal for Christian piety has got possession.’

A remarkable sentence about war (Ch. 23):

‘Yet, what is more foolish than to enter upon a conflict for I know not what causes wherein each side reaps more of loss than of gain? As for those who fall ... “no particulars”.....This famous game of war is played by parasites, panders, bandits, assassins, peasants, sots, bankrupts, and such other dregs of mankind....’.

Finally, a word on the religious wars, which occurred in Erasmus’ time as frequently as present (Ch. 59):

‘Now the Christian church was founded on blood, strengthened by blood, and augmented by blood; yet nowadays they carry on Christ’s cause by the sword just as if He who defends His own by His

own means had perished. And although war is so cruel a business that it befits beasts and not men.....so iniquitous that it is usually conducted by the worst bandits, so impious that it has no accord with Christ, yet our popes, neglecting all their other concerns, make it their only task.’

So far for Erasmus. By acting as a jester he could publish his criticism to his world.

The Mediaeval Jester

The mediaeval jester, with his cap and his mirror, evidently inspired Erasmus in his writings. The jester was a typical feature in many mediaeval noble courts. But this was not only so in the western world. In comparable appearance he also figured at the courts of the Aztec emperors, at those of the Shoguns of ancient Japan and of the Kalifs in the Arab world. Jesters were considered fools standing outside the real world, and that gave them the privilege to express unpleasant truths. Actually, in the authoritarian Middle Age countries they functioned as the only channel through which criticism could be put forward without danger to the one pronouncing it. Their social function was to reduce tension in society. Hence the saying, ‘The emperor needs the jester just as the jester needs the emperor’. Indeed, the jester was paid by the emperor and could not exist without his support, but the emperor’s position would be weaker without the jester.

The jester mirrors reality and turns upside down existing philosophies of life. This goes to the point at which it becomes unclear if folly is the mirror of reality or the other way round (Zijderveld, p. 12).

The understanding of the position of the jester is amplified by considering the relation between jesters and power or authority. He has to accept existing power, because he has no capacity to counter it. Countering power demands co-operation, planning and organisation. The jester, being a specific individual, has no power but neither is he impressed by power. Thus, the jester is a rebel, but he is not a revolutionary. His role with regard to authority is rather conservative. He is

critical, but he thus reduces social tensions and consolidates power. The jester functions as a conserving buffer between power and society.

The Jester in the Modern Era

In the 18th century enlightenment and rationalism appeared hand in hand. The enlightenment was a positive and optimistic philosophy of life, assuming continuous progress of mankind through the progress of science. Enlightenment considered human rationality as the ultimate power, and in such a world there seemed no place for the mediaeval institutional jester.

And yet, he returned in our time, in another shape and again with the task of presenting a mirror to our rapidly evolving society. 'Modern society has created a cultural climate in which, in principle, taboos need no longer be spared, where everything is possible and allowed, and where what is erratic, non-sublimated, strange, rude materialistic and uncivilised, have become normal. And, just as folly cannot exist without the established order to mirror itself, also the reverse is the case' (Zijderveld, p. 156).

Initially, this new feature had a gentle and playful character. Typical examples are the hippies from the 1970s and the 'flower-power' movement. Comparable to it are the 'encounter groups', aiming at impulsive and non-rational bodily expressions and rejecting rational checking and control (Zijderveld, p. 157). Similar to the mediaeval jester, these modern movements are mostly not so much anti-rational but rather non-rational. They are conservative by nature, directed at an idealised society, with the delights of our affluent commercial and industrialised community, but without its evils. In the same way as the mediaeval jester was paid by the emperor, the hippies could exist by the grace of the society that they rejected in principle. The fact that such groups could come into being should be seen as an statement of the quality of our present-days society. Would they not be necessary in a perfect democracy? Is their existence an expression of the feeling that they have insufficient

means to contribute to guiding our society? I think not. Just like the jester, these groups have no aspiration to power; they mainly want to demonstrate their criticism and stand aside for the rest.

At this point two comments are in order. The first is that there are also differences between the modern and the mediaeval jester. The latter was, in spite of his special position, an institute bound to clear rules that hardly changed over the centuries. This does not apply to the modern playful movements described above. They developed further. The ultimate consequence of such a development, in which bounds are not kept in vision, can be that the system evolves ultimately into one with an opposite character. This happens by what is called in French 'les défauts de ses qualités' ('the defects of his qualities') through which 'Jede Konsequenz führt zum Teufel' ('Strict consequence leads to the devil.)

Thus, the playful movements of the 1970s developed into the chaotic-aggressive and terrorist-destructive movements with an anti-rational basis that we observed so clearly in Gothenburg and Genoa. Also there, the movements remained essentially unorganised and without internal coherence. 'Folly is an anomic force indeed, and if not institutionally restricted, and when it loses its parasitic mirror-reality, it can become destructive' as Zijderveld (p. 157) already wrote in 1985.

The second comment is the following. No pronounced societal trend is an independent entity. The hippies were the tip of a three-stage pyramid. Their appearance would not have been possible without a broad structural underground. I view that underground in the broad appearance of movements with different names but with comparable contents: New Age, post-modernism, spirituality, Eastern philosophies: all with a quasi-intellectual appearance but with anti-scientific contents. Still broader, in the lowest stage of the pyramid so to say, resides the society-broad aversion to the scientific method and refuge in anti-rational philosophies. These are fed by the tabloid press and the consequences of mediocre school

education, and amplified by the media and further bred by organisations with an anti-rational character. As Erasmus already said, 'Many enjoy their blessed Elysées'.

Jesters and Sceptics

At the other end of the multidimensional spectrum of our society we find rational man, institutionalised in science with therein a role for sceptic movements that stand for the defence of rational thinking. The latter is badly needed, both at the 'top' as well as for public education.

The broad spread of a public anti-scientific tendency may seem strange: our world is one with a highly developed scientific technology that dominates our lives. Science is deeply integrated in the community. Why then do we witness so many societal trends against a scientific approach? A computer is now found in many a modern household, but in the case of illness, one seeks recourse in homeopathy, acupuncture, foot-sole reflex therapies and the like.

A possible cause may be that the rapid developments of science and technology of the past century could not be followed by the broad public. One hides or flies away. Fear of the atomic bomb leads to turning away from peaceful applications of nuclear energy. One sees the cloned sheep and turns away from medical genetic studies. This rejecting attitude is in part based on suspicion about the application of scientific research, mostly based on lack of information, an attitude that leads to a doom scenario. We also observe this attitude in some examples of environmental concern. There, the enthusiasm of the supporters, often fed by ignorance, makes them sometimes overshoot the mark, and so their well-meant concern may ultimately end in dogmatic fundamentalism. Some politicians, aiming at short-term success, tend to strengthen that attitude. Under the mask of the 'precaution principle' they pursue costly plans, while a little more intelligent thinking might have resulted in more efficient and successful projects that really protect the environment. For the environmental

movement a sceptical, scientific approach would be more efficient at the long run. The financial proceeds may be less but the credibility will win.

Public Information

Public information is needed to advance towards a society with an improved understanding of the benefits of a rational approach to mankind. It is also a task for sceptical organisations. Hence it is important that the sceptic thinks and argues in a balanced way: going to the extreme leads to extreme consequences. And that, as we know, lead to the devil. Against the absolute scepticism, as formulated by the Dutch 19th century writer Multatuli ('nothing is certain, not even this statement') we advance the modern balanced scepticism (Kurtz, 1992). In brief: we know a great deal and much is even very well known; but there is a transitory frontier area in the fields of our knowledge, where much is uncertain or even completely unknown. In that area, scepticism, i.e. a critical scientific attitude, is appropriate. A good scientist doubts much, not the least his or her own results. But at the same time, that scientist bases his or her research on the vast body of knowledge that is well known and rigorously tested and checked.

In our public information it would be incorrect to place our absolute truths against those of others. Rather, look at the mediaeval jester: teach people to think critically by sewing doubt where necessary, and thus introduce a counter-force against unscientific and incorrect information. Show them 'how unnecessary it is to make up fantasies when the truth is so much more fascinating' (Kaler, 1994, p. 453).

Summary

This paper has two aspects. The first is the question of the reality of the mirrored reality. The second is that of the adverse consequences of good principles that are pushed to the extreme. I illustrated this with a few examples.

I close with the final sentences of Erasmus: 'I see that you are expecting a peroration, but you are just too foolish if you suppose that after I have poured out a hodgepodge of words like this I can recall anything that I have said. There is an old saying, "I hate a pot-companion with a memory." Here is a new one: "I hate a hearer that remembers anything." And so farewellapplaud ... live ... drink ... O most distinguished initiates of Folly!'

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BLIND FAITH SYNDROME

Talk given at the 10th European Skeptical Congress, Prague, 9 September 2001.

Jan Zahradil MP

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Paranormal activities, all kinds of so-called sciences, charlatan movements, etc. seem to be omnipresent in modern society. Rational sceptics are naturally rather worried by their presence, booming and blossoming. They are regarded as an epitome of dangerous irrationality, which is moving away from the modernist rational thinking and has acquired unprecedented explosiveness over the past decades. The question is whether their presence is something quite new in our times, something exceeding both in quality and quantity the activities of the past, or whether it is something that has accompanied humanity on its evolutionary way as one of its main characteristics.

Many thinkers, different yet similar in certain aspects, such as social biologist Edward Wilson on the one hand and philosopher F. A. von Hayek on the other (there are a number of others we could name) have proved, quite plausibly, I believe, that tendencies to irrationality and also to

institutionalisation of irrationality are very likely an organic part of human nature. They may even be genetically encoded in mankind and thus hard and slow to overcome. I do not think there is any comparative analysis of the extent or volume of irrational thinking covering, for example, the periods before and between the world wars. Such analysis would tell us whether we are better or worse off today. Personally, I am an optimist, because I am convinced that we are better off today. I also think, that this improvement (and here I am a sceptic) is an evolutionary process that needs time.

Certainly, that does not mean we should content ourselves with the tide of irrationality and claims of paranormal occurrences. We only have to contend with the fact that there are limits in combating them and that these limits will be hard to overcome in the near future. Moreover, let us concede that today's reality is the breeding ground for both the irrational and paranormal: hastiness, leading to superficiality

and distractibility; sensationalism of the media; MTV-like reality of our time; a deluge of all kinds of information that is difficult to sort; surge of fashionable and short-lived, parlour-elitist philosophical and social fields; easy access to knowledge about various world cultures and superficial and poor reflection on such knowledge. These are just a few of a number of features, which form the paradigm of our time. In these conditions, irrationality profits, whereas deep and critical thought is absent or subject to relativism.

Post-communist societies, without a stable worldview, are often said to be more prone to embrace irrational teachings than stable, standard societies, which have not been subjected to the tremor of building 'real socialism'. I do not think this is correct. It would surely be rather hard to prove that, for instance, the numbers of astrological magazines and their readers by far exceed those in Western countries. What is more, I think that the contrary may be true: the populations of some post-communist countries may be, even if subconsciously, more sceptical to great and pathetic thoughts (and fraud too) due to their very historical experience. Nevertheless, there is one specific tendency more visible and unique in the post-communist countries than anywhere else. We may call it the 'blind faith syndrome'. Let me briefly describe this syndrome.

Communist, or rather socialist, systems have been regarded as extremely materialistic societies, or 'vulgarly' materialistic or 'vulgarly' rational. F.A. Hayek is often quoted in this context as saying that these systems suffered from the 'pride of reason'. Under this term, we usually understand their vain attempt to create a simple, foreseeable and planned model for the functioning of society, that is, an attempt that needs to be regarded as irrational and, what is more, based on thoroughly wrong analyses and premises. However, the contemporary criticism of this tendency in socialist regimes is double-edged. Today's critics see the failure of socialism, with a little hyperbole, the degenerate heir of an extreme branch of rationalism and materialism, as a sufficient reason for rejecting

or questioning the entire rationalist and materialism tradition, and in this lies an indirect attack on scientific thinking. This applies especially to the movements in society (and politics) that could be called traditionalist or ultra-conservative, usually rooted in Christian fundamentalism (known in the United States as the 'religious right'). Their theories are very simple. According to them, all evil started with enlightenment. Since then, mankind has been going in the wrong direction, because it has abandoned good and time-tested values. They see redemption in returning to some kind of a fictional open-air middle-age-like museum with saints, prophets, mysticism and miracles. The world and the universe are for them non-cognisable and non-accidental entities irreversibly moving towards the 'Original Intention'. Faith is the key opening their secret. Everything is measured against the depth of this faith.

Such 'pride of blind faith' is no better than the already mentioned 'pride of reason'. It is merely evidence of intellectual laziness and indolence, which resigns on difficult individual thinking. Holders of such views do not realise how close to the criticised Marxist principles they have come. Like Marxists, Christian fundamentalists reject accidental, spontaneous, unplanned things, interactions of random processes, etc, because these phenomena disturb their idea of reality as a 'linear function' represented by non-cognisable God's will.

I do not claim that this train of thought is decisive or that it prevails among others we are fighting in our current clash with irrational tendencies. However, it is here, it is visible, it is surfacing in the media and in public discourse. I feel that the sceptic and rational thinkers very often regard post-modern relativism as their foremost enemy, more popular and louder than the 'blind faith syndrome'. However, this is no reason to forget about it. After the demise of the 'pride of reason' it is inevitable that the principal clash of the future will be between open, free and critical thinking and the 'pride of blind faith'.

TONY GIBSON (1914-2001)

Michael Heap

Dr. Hamilton Bertie (Tony) Gibson died in Cambridge on March 22nd, 2001 at the age of 86. From 1970 to 1976 he was Principal Lecturer and Head of the Department of Psychology at Hatfield Polytechnic (now the University of Hertfordshire) and, prior to retiring in 1979, Senior Research Fellow, a position he thereafter retained in an honorary capacity. Tony was also a Chartered Clinical Psychologist and an authority on hypnosis.

I knew Tony professionally and personally from around 1978, when the British Society of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis (BSECH) was founded, very much as a result of his efforts. However, it was not until 1985 that I discovered that he had an active interest in scepticism. The occasion was the 3rd Annual International Conference on the Paranormal at University College London, sponsored by CSICOP. Many of the leading lights of the sceptical movement were there. Tony was notoriously outspoken, and at the end of one lecture, a very tedious exposition of the fallacy that we are in the Age of Aquarius, Tony's hand shot up and he bawled out the question, 'Why do waste your time on such a load of codswallop?' Later he wrote articles and letters on sceptical matters, notably alternative medicine (e.g. Quackupuncture: A question of medical ethics, *The Skeptic*, 1992, **9**, 18-20) and religion – he was an aggressive atheist.

Tony had an interesting life. His first choice of career was medicine, and in 1934 he embarked on a MB Part I at Kings College London. However, he abandoned this and was attracted to the Bohemian life of Fitzrovia, Soho and Bloomsbury in London. At one stage he worked as an artist's life model and his handsome face became one of the best known in the country when he posed for an advertisement for Brylcreem. It is said that the hairdresser who attended him had none in stock and had to rely on a rival brand. In 1940 an RAF cap was added plus the caption 'For active service' and he became known as the 'Brylcreem Boy'.

In fact, by then Tony had become an anarchist and was a conscientious objector. Amongst other things he spent the war as a paramedic and ambulance driver. The story is told that his first callout was to attend two soldiers, one of whom had bumped his nose, while the other had fainted at the sight of the blood.

How authentic some of these stories are I do not know, but Tony had a keen sense of the ridiculous and delighted in exploiting the absurdity of situations in which he occasionally found himself involved. The following is a piece he wrote for the BSECH Newsletter in 1982/3. It is very relevant to the theme of the current issue of the Skeptical Intelligencer.

HYPNOSIS AND FLYING SAUCERS: A CASE STUDY

H.B. Gibson

A funny thing happened to me on the way to a BSECH meeting a few weeks ago. I had a telephone call from a solicitor in a northern town who said that he had heard of me as a specialist in age-regression and he asked me to come up to this town and hypnotise a policeman. I tried to get full details of the case from him and suggested that I could supply him with the names of BSECH members who lived in his part of the country. No, his clients were willing to pay generously, and he wanted to assure them that he was getting the chairman of a well-known national hypnosis society to do the job really efficiently. And the details of the case - was it a criminal case? No, it wasn't criminal although the police were involved, and he did not wish to reveal the details in case I would be biased by such knowledge; he just wanted the policeman age regressed to a certain date to see what could be discovered about his experiences.

I told him that I didn't really want to take the case on, but that he should write to me and then I would suggest whom he might approach. At least I needed some details about the sort of case it was. The ensuing letter from him gave some rather peculiar details. This policeman had been hypnotised twice by psychiatrists and some strange facts had emerged. The psychiatrists had been convinced of the genuineness of what they appeared to have found out, but apparently this solicitor did not feel satisfied with what had apparently been produced and wished to secure the services of someone who might have a more scientific approach to the investigation. Although revealing very little about the case, he intimated that other witnesses were tangentially involved in the case and they had also been hypnotised and age regressed with surprising results.

I began to get intrigued in the affair, and I must say that I suspected that some awful political and social

scandal was brewing in this northern town. From the meagre details he supplied, I began to suspect that someone was trying to pull the wool over the eyes of others by means of (alleged) age regression, that two psychiatrists had fallen for it, but that this solicitor was being too shrewd for them.

After further correspondence and telephone calls, I became so interested in the mystery that I agreed to travel half-way across England (suitably fee-ed of course) to interview this policeman and perhaps some other witnesses.

This unusual solicitor (a man of high intelligence, engaging personality and expensive tastes) wined and dined me at a good hotel but declined to tell me more about the case, other than that I was to see the policeman in the morning, that the whole proceedings would be properly videotaped and that some witnesses would sit unobtrusively in the room out of sight.

All I was told was the date of the incident: it began with PC Charlie (as I will call him) on duty at the police station when a telephone call comes in from a local resident on the housing estate reporting cows straying into her garden. 'Take it from there', I was told. As I had suspected some possible hypnotic simulation I had come prepared with my appropriate bag of tricks - some microlances, a version of the Stroop Test, and some wheezes Martin Orne had put me up to. I need not have bothered. I used a perfectly standard hypnotic induction procedure with PC Charlie; he certainly closed his eyes and kept them closed, but to suggestions of relaxation it was manifest that he did the opposite, gripping the arms of the chair more tightly and frowning more grimly. Hand and arm levitation? Not a sign. Challenge for eye catalepsy? He screwed up his eyes more tightly.

He obviously had his own idea about what hypnosis should be like and he was not going to be deviated from it. Indeed, it occurred to me that his manifest tension might reflect the fact that he was strongly resisting any possibility that I might really succeed in hypnotising him, and thus reveal...

Seeing that I could get no further after long and persistent efforts to 'deepen the trance', I proceeded to suggest that he was back in the police station on the date in question at 1 a.m.

'What are you doing?'

'We're playing cards. Joe's losing all time, silly bugger. Ee, there's telephone ringing.'

Then followed a short telephone conversation; apparently a woman on the nearby housing estate was complaining that cows had strayed into her garden. Out he goes in the police car accompanied by one of his mates to the designated address. No sign of cows anywhere. Back to the police station; they make tea and continue to play cards.

Another telephone call with cows reported in another garden on the estate. Out they go again, but discover no cows anywhere. Back to the station where the 'silly bugger' Joe continues to lose money. So the night wears on, everything being reported in the present tense in vernacular speech, sometimes in a barely comprehensible mumble. Repeated suggestions that he should speak up produced little effect. He was one of the least suggestible subjects I have ever encountered.

Later in the small hours PC Charlie goes out in the police car on his own on a routine patrol of the district, and we have a dull account of the environs of a northern town early on a wet morning with no-one around. But suddenly:

'Ee, what's that blocking road? It looks like a bloody great diamond! All lights, blocking whole road. Lights flickerin'. It's terrible!'

Then follows a graphic description of a 'flying saucer' of the conventional type, as depicted in so many science fiction magazines.

This 'flying saucer' is of course illegally parked as it occupies the whole road, and I remind PC Charlie that it is his duty to investigate it.

'Nay, I'm not going near there. I'm frightened! Tha's awful - tha's terrible. Nay, I can't move!'

Signs of hyperventilation in our hero, and the arms of the chair are yet more firmly gripped. I suggest that if he opens his eyes wider (they are firmly closed) he will see more clearly. I hope either to obtain an open-eyed trance, or to get him to look me in the eyes while he repeats this monstrous stuff. But his eyes remain firmly closed and screwed up.

Apparently the engine of the car has stalled and cannot be restarted and his walkie-talkie has gone dead so he cannot call up his mates. A period of confusion follows in which his mumbling becomes even more difficult to understand, but eventually it is apparent that he is right inside the 'flying saucer' and is confronted by some uncanny creatures. There is 'an 'orrible great dog - who isn't a dog', and what appears to be a giant spotted jellyfish that caresses him with its loathsome tentacles. But eventually:

'There's someone I know.'

'Who is he?'

'It's Joseph.'

'And is Joseph a local lad?'

'Nay, 'e's from "out there". I've known 'im all me life. E's grinning at me.'

Patient inquiry elicits that he first knew Joseph at the age of six, and when he told his mother about Joseph she said that he had been having a nightmare. He had also met Joseph on other occasions during his life.

The videotape recording of this session was rather long, and although I haven't seen it, it must be extraordinarily funny in a broad sort of way. PC Charlie certainly has histrionic talent and his vernacular account of his encounter with the 'flying saucer' and the strange monsters therein was very racy. I could perhaps arrange for the solicitor to show it to serious students of psychopathology, but not just for laughs.

After I concluded the 'hypnosis', I asked the witnesses to leave the room and I had a private talk with this policeman. I put it to him frankly that in my opinion he had not been hypnotised at all, but was simply 'putting on an act' to take the mickey out of those who were willing to pay good money to witness such a performance, and to try to make a fool of psychiatrists and psychologists such as me, who might be led to believe that they had hypnotised him. He denied this and further discussion revealed that he had had other 'paranormal' experiences in his life (not involving 'flying saucers') that had been both frightening and upsetting, and he seemed genuinely concerned about his mental health. Some of these experiences had included the figure of 'Joseph' who had been in the 'flying saucer'. I then told him that some people were prone to a disorder known as narcolepsy, which might involve something like waking nightmares with accompanying transient paralysis (*Editor's note: see article by C. French in this issue*). (He had mentioned this latter symptom.) He told me some more of a private nature and the fact that the police force had once got him to go for a psychiatric investigation. It seems to me that this was not entirely a hoax perpetrated for the benefit of the 'flying saucer' buffs (the witnesses and the solicitor who had engaged

me) but that, as some educated people were prepared to try to convince him that his encounter with the 'flying saucer' was real rather than hallucinatory, ergo he was mentally stable, and merely a victim of the people 'out there'.

Later, I put all this to the solicitor who had contacted me and warned him that he should be chary of precipitating a paranoid reaction in PC Charlie, as such a reaction might very well rebound on him personally and other members of the UFO society who had taken him up. I did not, of course, venture definitely to diagnose narcolepsy on such slender evidence, but I did mention it as a possibility.

It turned out that this solicitor has some official standing in the UFO society, but he appeared to be rather more scientifically oriented than some of his colleagues, and anxious to use scientific methods in investigating the credibility of witnesses who report wonderful stories, hence his seeking my aid. He wanted to retain my services further as a consultant in the investigation of such seemingly miraculous events and I had some difficulty in convincing him that I found such things rather a bore. After some ensuing correspondence in which I referred him to the usual books (*When Prophecy Fails*, and *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*) I managed to extricate myself from the proffered position of consultant to a UFO society. Above all, I hope that I will not be concerned with any future paranoid reactions on the part of PC Charlie, the copper who refused to give a parking ticket to an illegally parked 'flying saucer' and who apparently convinced two psychiatrists of the genuineness of his experience.

BOOK REVIEW

***Weird Water & Fuzzy Logic: More Notes of A Fringe Watcher.* Martin Gardner. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996. ISBN 1 57392 096 7. 260 pages.**

Reviewed by Ray Ward

Ray Ward is a Government Librarian in London. He is a member of ASKE and an Associate Member of CSICOP.

Martin Gardner is the Grand Old Man of paranormal debunkers, but he rarely appears in public, confining his contributions almost entirely to his writings, of which this (*at the time of this review*) is the latest in a series of fine collections.

First come 16 items from Gardner's 'Notes of a Fringe Watcher' feature in the *Skeptical Inquirer*. Most of them have addenda, sometimes quite lengthy, with letters, often strongly criticising and disagreeing with Gardner, followed by his responses. The first item is about the fuss over the answer to a brainteaser given by Marilyn vos Savant (two of whose claims to fame are that she was in the *Guinness Book of Records* for supposedly having the highest-ever IQ, and that she married Robert Jarvik, inventor of the artificial heart). Then come the Big Bang and its rivals, and a lively demolition of Marianne Williamson and *A Course in Miracles*, supposedly 'channelled' to a psychologist, Helen Cohen Schucman.

Next is the sad story of Margaret Mead, who built the work that made her name, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, on a hoax by Samoan girls who, embarrassed and offended by questions about sex, a taboo topic, from someone they thought was just a tourist, decided to play a 'harmless' joke, and told her what she wanted to hear. The result was an anthropological myth not exploded until *Margaret Mead and Samoa* by the Australian anthropologist Derek Freeman (1983). One is left bewilderedly wondering how the 'enormously gullible' Mead, with

her occult beliefs, her conviction that Earth is being observed by extraterrestrials, and her claim to be accompanied by two 'spirit guides', was ever taken seriously. (*Editor's note: But see articles by James E. Cote and Paul Shankman, Skeptical Enquirer, Volume 22 (6), 1998, pp. 35-39.*)

Korzybski's 'E-Prime' is followed by a passionate piece on the ghastly tragedy of 'repressed memory therapy' (RMT), which Gardner rightly calls 'the mental-health crisis of the 1990s'. Poorly trained therapists convinced people they had been sexually abused as children, ripping families apart, breaking the hearts of innocent parents and other relatives, and sometimes resulting in innocent people being sent to prison. Ludicrous tales of participation in murdering babies, eating their flesh, etc., are 'remembered'. As Gardner says, childhood sexual assaults are almost never forgotten. Not only do victims not repress memories (that is, completely forget without any conscious effort), they try unsuccessfully to forget them. What could be more dreadful, and a better candidate for repression, than witnessing the murder of a parent? Yet studies show that among children who had that appalling experience not one repressed the memory. That childhood traumas can be totally forgotten for decades is, he says, the great mental health myth of our time, and is devastating innocent families and enormously damaging psychiatry. He prints a cartoon of a man saying he must have been kidnapped by aliens because he has the number

one symptom - no memory of being kidnapped by aliens!

Chapter Seven gives the book part of its title, being about 'H₂OH!', .the preposterous things said about water, including the classic 'polywater' nonsense, 'water with a memory', and the claims for hydrotherapy of John Harvey Kellogg, who invented.....well, with that name I'm sure you can guess what he invented! Gardner also touches here on another old chestnut. 'suppressed' inventions and even a 'murdered' inventor!

Next up are Norman Vincent Peale; the cult of the golden ratio; and a favourite of sceptics, eyeless vision, with the case of the Reverend Ronald Coyne, who 'saw' with his false right eye and made much of this simple trick with hysterical shows at which money is collected before *and after!*

Chapter 11 returns to RMT, with more stories so fantastic and utterly lacking in evidence that it is hard to credit that anyone believed them, yet people went to prison because of them. The next piece, more light, is on science howlers in literature and begins with an interesting discussion of C.F. Snow's 'two cultures': scientists are often very knowledgeable about the arts but those trained in the arts tend to be appallingly ignorant of even the most elementary science. This was one of the themes of Richard Dawkins' Dibleby Lecture. He said that it has become almost a cliché to say that no one boasts of ignorance of the arts but many people seem proud of a lack of scientific knowledge. My favourite of the blunders mentioned concerns Ralph in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, who starts a fire by concentrating the sun's rays using the glasses of the short-sighted Piggy. These would be concave and only convex lenses can focus sunlight on a small spot. The next chapter pursues the theme with a discussion of poets who seem to think that scientific knowledge destroys awareness of nature's wonders.

We pass on to the magician Doug Henning, who became a convert of the 'Giggling Guru' and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; artificial languages

(beginning with a quotation which sums up in seven words why they will never succeed - 'Do you speak Esperanto?' 'Like a native!': because they are no one's native language, everyone has to learn them). Finally we have the source of the second part of the title: fuzzy logic, its advocates and detractors.

The second part of the book contains 30 (actually 29) book reviews: twelve from the *News and Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina (Gardner lives in that state); nine from *Book World*; three from *Nature*, and the rest from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Science 84*, the *New York Review of Books*, *The Humanist* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. There is also a brief piece from the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research (JSPR)*, rather oddly placed in this section, since it is not a book review (though it does stem from a German article published in translation in the *JSPR* on which Gardner commented in the *Skeptical Inquirer*). It is infact a splendidly withering demolition of Silvio Meyer's 'Permanent Paranormal Object', showing how easily it can be fabricated, with an addendum calling the *JSPR's* editor, John Beloff (whom I have met) 'England's most gullible parapsychologist!' Fine, but I wish he'd said 'Britain's'. He also mentions on page 143 'England's general election', telling us that Doug Henning was a Natural Law Party candidate.

Gardner is full of excellent phrases, such as, when dismissing the idea that humanity can give way to silicon intelligence: 'This is nonsense' (page 204) and 'Supercomputers no more know they are playing chess than dishwashing machines know they are washing dishes' (page 205). Likewise: 'Here we go again - another worthless book pandering to public obsession with the paranormal' (*Spontaneous Human Combustion* by Jenny Randles and Peter Hough) (page 252). A repeated theme is that there is a real, physical structured universe 'out there', independent of human observation. His review of Bruce Murray's *Journey Into Space* (pages 195-197) contains a passionate defence of the value and importance of space exploration, which had me - a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society - cheering.

There are a few minor errors: 'Guinness' is misspelt in the first piece, with one n, though since it is in a quotation from Marilyn vos Savant's publicity one doesn't know whether it is their mistake or Gardner's. I think the reference on page 115 to a proposal that John Mack, the Harvard alien-abductions psychiatrist, should be 'censored' should be 'censored'. The mention of 'Christopher

Syke's' biography of Richard Feynman (page 134) should of course be 'Christopher Sykes's'. The binding could be better: my copy came apart very quickly! And an index would have added greatly to the book's usability and usefulness.

VISIONS OF THE YEAR 2002

By

The Grand Oracle of the Pentacles

The editor has just received the following verses from the Grand Oracle of the Pentacles. These describe her visions of the year 2002 while entranced in her crystal ball, as the last seconds of the old year ticked away. The Oracle wishes the editor to inform readers that her crystal ball does not operate strictly according to the solar year and some of her visions may extend into 2003.....

Readers may wish to study the Oracle's pronouncements in a year's time to ascertain their authenticity.

PROLOGUE

*The chimes that once bade welcome to the dying year
Are sadder and gentler now as they greet the new,
While in my crystal ball I see strange clouds gathering
And swirling with growing fervour.
Vague shapes and shadows take their form and then disperse,
Portents of pictures to be seen on other screens
In other homes, as the New Year unfolds.
What are these visions that command my straining eyes
As the sombre chimes announce the New Year's coming?*

THE VISIONS

*The eagle, thrice wounded, lengthens its menacing shadow. And swoops!
Chaos and mayhem threaten. Alarm in the old kingdoms, but to no avail.
To the east two giants grapple, eye to eye.
A soldier imperiled. The bear is restless.*

*Power undisputed! More of an oak is number one,
But number two weakens.
By the last quarter, fortunes turn.
The banker and the gambler rub their hands.*

*Soaring again o'er dome and temple
The weary dove at last alights.
Island races (the letter T)
Welcome him also.*

*Meanwhile, the rose garden blooms. The old lady smiles.
Lucky is one and one, not so Q and D.
Strife in the middle. The pretender falters.
The people warm to the new tide.*

*To our people the sixth and twelfth bring joy.
Two shocks! One mystery solved, one mystery death.
Another beast makes its mark in the great race.
Disasters in the summer waters.*

*Faint now are the signs of that which is to come.
What can they be, these lingering shades?
One prince stricken. For another, great joy.
Still hunted is the fox. The rat knows justice.*

*A villain is mourned. Fire in the southern sky!.....
(Alas, the mists subside.)*

EPILOGUE

*Farewell, then, to the one the Emperor loved.
Farewell the jester, long in years, likewise the star.
Farewell to the father greatly mourned.
Welcome the new in the rising smoke!*

THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY

ASKE is an association of people who support the following aims and principles:

- ASKE is committed to the application of rational, objective and scientific methods to the investigation and understanding of ideas, claims, and practices, especially those of an extraordinary and paranormal nature.
- ASKE is committed to challenging the uncritical promotion of beliefs and claims which are unsupported or contradicted by existing objective and scientific knowledge.
- ASKE opposes the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of science for purposes which deceive the public.
- ASKE supports the objective evaluation of all medical or psychological techniques offered to the public and opposes the uncritical promotion of techniques which are unsupported or contradicted by existing scientific knowledge.
- ASKE supports all efforts to promote the public awareness of the rational and scientific understanding of extraordinary and paranormal claims.
- ASKE is committed to a rational understanding of the reasons and motives which underlie the promotion and acceptance of irrational and paranormal claims and beliefs.
- ASKE accepts the rights of individuals to choose for themselves their beliefs about the world.

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