

Skeptical Intelligencer, Spring 2013

THE SKEPTICAL **INTELLIGENCER**



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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

To access a pdf copy of this issue, please contact the Editor at m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk. If you are an ASKE member and would like a paper copy sending, again email the Editor.

CONTENTS

Guidelines for Authors	2	The European Scene	10
From the ASKE Chairman	3	Of Interest	10
Logic and Intuition	4	Upcoming Events	14
Medicine on the Fringe	4	About ASKE	15
Language on the Fringe	7		

✍ Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* again makes its appearance as a quarterly magazine, having appeared annually for a number of years. It now incorporates the previously quarterly ASKE newsletter, the *Skeptical Adversaria*. Paper editions are available on request (see above). The magazine is widely circulated electronically to skeptical groups and individuals across the globe. Formal and informal articles of interest to skeptics are welcome from people of all disciplines and backgrounds. If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief? Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features? Please get in touch with the Editor if you wish to make a contribution to skepticism in this way.

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

The *Skeptical Intelligencer* welcomes formal and informal contributions on any subject within the ambit of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE).

Formal articles should be aimed at the intelligent layperson, and authors should take particular care to define or explain unusual terms or concepts. Equations, statistics or other numerical and symbolic tools may be employed whenever required. Articles should be as succinct as possible, but may be of any length.

Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should be 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.

Whenever possible, authors should submit a printed, double-spaced, hard copy of their article or letter, together with a 3.5-inch DOS-formatted floppy disk to the address shown on the front cover. Alternatively, contributions may be sent by e-mail direct to the editor at: <m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>. Texts should in either ASCII text-only; Rich Text Format; or MS-Word.

When referring to another work, authors should:

- Cite only the surname, year, and (where appropriate) page number within the main text: e.g. '...according to Hyman (1985: p. 123), the results of this test were not convincing...' or '...according to Bruton (1886; cited in Ross, 1996)...'
- List multiple references in date order: e.g. '...a number of studies have thrown doubt on this claim (Zack, 1986; Al-Issa, 1989; Erikson, 1997)...'
- In the case of electronic material, give the author and the date the material was accessed on line
- Place Internet addresses URLs in angle brackets: e.g. <http://www.nothing.org>

A complete list of references in alphabetical order of authors' surnames should be given at the end of the article. The list should be compiled using the following conventions:

- *Articles*: Smith, L.J. (1990) An examination of astrology. *Astrological Journal*, **13**, 132-196.
- *Books*: Naranjo, X. (1902) *The End of the Road*. London: University of London.
- *Chapters*: Griff, P. (1978) Creationism. In D. Greengage (ed.) *Pseudoscience*. Boston: Chapman Publishers.
- *Electronic material*: Driscoe, E. Another look at Uri Geller. <http://www.etc.org>. Accessed 21 April 1997.

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

As I write this Editorial I am looking out at my front garden which is covered in up to one foot of snow, very unusual for the time of year (late March). I am also concerned whether the speaker at tomorrow's Sheffield Skeptics in the Pub meeting will be able to make the journey.

When I and my colleagues first arranged the event we had no idea that it would be jeopardised by severe weather, but this possibility began to impinge on my consciousness about 5 days ago when I heard the weather forecast for the week.

Not entirely unrelated to the above (as you will shortly see), I have just been reading assessments of the latest Budget by the economics correspondents of the two Sunday newspapers that we read in our house – the *Sunday Times* and the *Independent on Sunday*. Writing in the former, Dominic Lawson (son of former Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson) berates the present Chancellor, George Osborne, for his plan to offer £12bn of taxpayers' money as security for mortgages that banks themselves would deem too risky to underwrite. Mr Lawson forecasts that this will merely lead to 'another debt-fuelled housing boom'. No doubt Mr Osborne and his advisors predict otherwise.

Mr Lawson also notes that when Mr Osborne presented his Budget to Parliament, sitting close by and, not looking too happy, was Vince Cable, the Coalition's Business Secretary. Mr Lawson reminds us that in 2003 Mr Cable informed the then Chancellor Gordon Brown that the growth in the UK economy, much vaunted by Mr Brown ('The years of boom and bust are over'), was 'sustained by consumer spending pinned against record levels of personal debt which is secured, if at all, by house prices, which the Bank of England describes as well above equilibrium level'. Mr Brown tersely informed Mr Cable that he was wrong.

Mr Cable was, of course, proved right. Few people in power, in fact, seem to have predicted the disaster to come and even our Prime Minister David

Cameron has publicly apologised for failing to do so.

When I was studying for my Psychology degree 45 years ago, a favourite exam question was: 'It is more difficult to predict human behaviour than it is the weather: discuss'. Since economics largely concerns human behaviour and decision-making (*note 1*), the spirit of the question should apply to that discipline also. In fact, economic forecasts, of which there is never any shortage, are notoriously unreliable. And when it comes to policies, even top experts disagree on the most fundamental of issues, such as whether the UK should, in the long term, become part of the Eurozone, whether we should disengage from the European Union, how much the government should be spending, and how the banking crisis should have been handled

Economic forecasts, of which there is never any shortage, are notoriously unreliable.

So far as predicting the weather is concerned, I think, given the advance in meteorological forecasting since the 1960s, it is likely that one would approach the exam question rather differently these days (*note 2*). However, of topical interest now is climate, both local and global. The scientific consensus is that the planet is warming owing to the increase in greenhouse gases in our atmosphere and this is due to human activity. It is also generally agreed that this will, on the whole, have adverse effects globally and we should do something about it (and should have done so long ago). Indeed some climatologists are predicting

catastrophic consequence for humankind and the planet's eco system.

The little I know about these matters allows me to be confident that predicting long-term climate change *at a local level* can be problematic, particular somewhere like the UK which, owing to a combination of factors, enjoys a relatively temperate climate despite its northerly location. This has not prevented some experts from making extreme pronouncements about the implications that global warming has for the kind of weather we will have to grow accustomed to here in the UK. So far, some of these predictions have been wrong, notably the idea that by now we should be experiencing mild winters and children will be growing up not knowing the joys of playing out in the snow. Failed predictions such as these provide ammunition to those commentators who, though possessing no particular expertise on the subject, are antithetical to the idea of manmade global warming. On a recent Radio 4 news programme in which the subject of the wintry weather came up, Peter Hitchens used this failed prediction to rubbish the whole idea of global climate change.

One person who has woken up to this is James Lovelock. In January 2006 he predicted that by the end of the 21st century, as a result of global warming, 'billions of us will die and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable' (*note 3*). In 2008 he predicted, 'By 2040, the world population of more than six billion will have been culled by floods, drought and famine. The people of Southern Europe, as well as South-East Asia, will be fighting their way into countries such as Canada, Australia and Britain. We will

have to set up encampments in this country, like those established for the hundreds of thousands of refugees displaced by the conflict in East Africa' (note 4).

Professor Lovelock announced many such predictions but he has now made a confession. In an interview in April 2012 (note 5) he admitted to having been 'alarmist' about climate change and said that other environmental commentators, such as Al Gore, have been too. 'The problem is' he said, 'we don't know what the climate is doing. We thought we knew 20 years ago. That led to some alarmist books – mine included – because it looked clear-cut, but it hasn't happened....There's nothing much really happening yet. We were supposed to be halfway toward a frying world now....The world has not warmed up very much since the millennium. Twelve years is a reasonable time....it (*the temperature*) has stayed almost constant, whereas it should have been rising - carbon dioxide is rising, no question about that'.

Throughout my life, serious predictions of global catastrophes by experts have regularly featured in the news and continue to do so. As well as climate, prominent ones have concerned nuclear war, population, food, natural resources including energy (note 6), the Millennium bug, and the world economy (note 7). The budget deficit and the unseasonal UK weather notwithstanding (it's still snowing in Sheffield), we are still doing pretty well (note 8).

If only because of this dismal record, it seems appropriate for sceptics to be instinctively wary, though certainly not dismissive, about warnings of impending catastrophes, even by well-qualified experts. Perhaps such people feel that only by making extreme predictions will people listen to their concerns. Perhaps their message is hyped up by the media. And of course, the media tend only to publicise the more extreme prognostications, ignoring more measured assessments.

Likewise, sceptics should be suspicious of predictions expressed in terms of certainty, particularly concerning complex systems such as the weather and the climate, economics, and human behaviour. Clearly there is uncertainty about the progress and the long-term effects of global warming, especially at local levels such as in the UK, and climatologists have been at fault in expressing their opinions so categorically. Recently, the warnings about the weather and climate by the UK government's retiring chief scientist Sir John Beddington, seemed to convey an appropriate level of urgency (note 9).

Terrible things are happening in the world that were predicted and seem likely to become worse.

Terrible things are happening in the world that *were* predicted and seem likely to become worse. One that I am thinking of now is biodiversity and the exponential extinction rate of species on our planet, which has been ascribed to human activity (note 9). However, I at least am confident that, in the absence of any personal disaster, I shall be penning another Editorial for the *Intelligencer* in three months' time.

Notes

1. For a very informative account of the role of human decision-making in economics see Tim Halford's *The Undercover Economist* (Abacus, 2006). Another popular and more controversial book is *Freakonomics* by Steven L. Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner (Penguin, 2006).
2. A meteorologist on the radio reported that, thanks to technology such as advanced computers and satellites, today's 5-day weather forecast is as accurate as the 1-day forecast 25 years ago. In contrast, the UK Met Office has just apologised for its three-monthly outlook published at the end of March 2012 which stated, 'The forecast for average UK rainfall slightly favours drier than average

conditions for April-May-June, and slightly favours April being the driest of the three months'. The Met Office later confessed: 'Given that April was the wettest since detailed records began in 1910 and the April-May-June quarter was also the wettest, this advice was not helpful'.

3. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/james-lovelock-the-earth-is-about-to-catch-a-morbid-fever-that-may-last-as-long-as-100000-years-523161.html>
4. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-541748/Were-doomed-40-years-global-catastrophe--theres-NOTHING-says-climate-change-expert.html>
4. <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2012/04/23/11144098-gaia-scientist-james-lovelock-i-was-alarmist-about-climate-change?lite>
5. For more on this I recommend *Futurebabble* by Dan Gardner (Virgin, 2011). Mr Gardner, amongst many other things, reminds us how, in the mid-1970s, the American people gathered round their television sets to hear their President, Jimmy Carter, sombrely inform them (on the advice of his experts) that the age of cheap oil was over and that new sources of energy were required to avoid national catastrophe.
6. The 'imminent collapse of the capitalist system' was regularly predicted in the late 1960s and early 1970s (and before and after), to be accompanied by revolutions in developed western countries. Ten years later, Margaret Thatcher was in power in the UK, then Ronald Reagan in the USA, followed by the collapse of communism and increasing globalisation.
7. Matt Ridley is a writer who provides an antidote to global catastrophic thinking; see his book *The Rational Optimist* (Harper Collins 2010/11).
8. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-21357520>
9. http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/

LOGIC AND INTUITION

Guessing the Cube Root

This is a little party trick you can easily learn to do to impress your friends. You have to learn some information by rote to begin with but once you have done this effectively, the rest is easy.

The effect is as follows. Ask someone with a calculator to secretly choose any number between 0 and a 100 and to find its cube (x multiplied by x multiplied by x). Ask the person what the result is (e.g. 70,4969) and you immediately tell them what their chosen number was – in this case 89.

How do you do this? Is there an easy formula that you can apply mentally? No. Do you have to learn all the cubes of numbers between 0 and 100. No. There is a shortcut using a set of rules. But what are they? Think about this before looking at the answer below.

Answer

By way of preparation, all you need do is memorise the cubes of the numbers from 1 to 9. These are as follows:

1	1
2	8
3	27
4	64
5	125
6	216
7	343
8	512
9	729

So when your friend gives you the cube – 704,969 - you will immediately know that the second digit (in the units column of their chosen number must be 9 (note that the above cubes all end with a different number). To work out what the first digit is (in the tens column), simply ignore the last 3 digits of the

number your friend has given you; in the present case this leaves you with 704. 704 is bigger than 8 cubed (512) but less than 9 cubed (729). Therefore the first digit must be 8 and the answer is 89.

If your friend gives the number 79,507, the second digit is 3 (3 cubed gives a number ending in 7) and the first digit is 4 (79 lies between 4 cubed [64] and 5 cubed [125]). So the answer is 43.

(Unfortunately, if your friend gives you, say, the number 2,834 you will automatically say 14 but you are now wrong because your friend – either deliberately or in error - has not, in fact, given you the cube of any whole number!

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

Two recent articles, one in the *Sunday Times* and the other in the *Times*, caused my heart to sink in a similar manner, though they concerned unrelated matters. The connecting theme that caused my adverse reaction is unclear but I think it is something to do with the kind of sloppy, dumbed-down thinking that should be considered out of place in newspapers of such distinction.

Children in Buggies

The *Sunday Times* article appeared on its front page on 3.2.13 and was headlined 'Buggy children unable to walk at 3'. It seems that some 3-year-olds haven't learnt to walk because they spend so much time in their buggies. The source of the announcement is no less a person than Ms Louise Casey, David Cameron's special advisor on problem families. Shock was my immediate reaction. However, my sceptical

antennae began quivering, thanks to decades of exposure to a relentless succession of dire warnings about the dangers that modern technology presents to children's physical and mental wellbeing. On what evidence does Ms Casey base this alarming claim? At a meeting of relevant cross-party groups in Westminster, she recalled being told about it 'by a head teacher in the north of England'. And that's it! I expect she'll soon be announcing what a woman in the checkout queue at Tesco told her.

Placebo Prescribing

The *Times* article appeared on 28.1.13 and was penned by a journalist called Kevin Maher who *appears* to make a case for the prescribing of placebo medication. I say *appears* because the author's manic style of writing means that he never stays in any one place long

enough for this reader, at least, to be sure of the points he is trying to make and what logic lies behind them. What, for example, do we make of the title of the piece 'I'd rather be "cured" by a placebo than rely on science and remain ill'? On what grounds does Mr Maher make this either/or distinction? *Any* prescription, whether it be sugar pills or clinically approved medication, has the potential to provide him with the benefit of a placebo response. Why not opt for the one that may offer something in addition?

Mr Maher wrote his piece in response to the comments of the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, who informed the Commons Science and Technology Committee that homeopathy is 'rubbish' and no more effective than placebo. This set off a diatribe by Mr Maher against scientifically-based medicine (i.e.

medicine whose rationale and efficacy have been critically assessed) and scientists and science in general. 'Isn't the irony here that modern science doesn't make sense either?' he asks. What does he mean by 'doesn't make sense'? 'It's a movable feast, a constantly changing terrain of narrative ideas and malleable theories'. He then gives the Newtonian model of the atom as an example.

If, instead of immediately jumping on his hobby horse and riding off in all directions at the same time, Mr Maher had thought more deeply about his subject (or, to be less charitable, knew more about it) he could have made a better case for *deliberate* (as opposed to inadvertent) placebo prescribing.

You could argue that there is a case for prescribing cheap placebo remedies that have no adverse side effects, such as homeopathy.

Like Mr Maher, I'm not best placed to comment on these matters but communicated with many GPs in my professional work and even taught them, and they are usually quite open about the fact that much of the time they are essentially prescribing in placebo fashion. Quite some time ago now I came across the following in a critique of contemporary medical practices:

Sir Douglas Black, a past president of the Royal College of Physicians, estimated that only about 10% of diseases are significantly influenced by modern treatment. This echoes the opinion of Sir George Pickering who guessed that in some 90% of patients seen by a general practitioner the effects of treatment are unknown or there is no specific remedy which influences the course of the disease. Yet prescribing in general practice is the rule rather than the exception.

(Skrabaneck, P.S. and McCormick, J. [1989] *Follies and Fallacies in Medicine*. Glasgow: The Tarragon Press. pp 10-11).

In other words, patients frequently improve after taking medicine prescribed by their GP for reasons unrelated to the actual medicine. Much water has passed under the bridge since then, but GPs I have recently approached for their comments tell me that, although things have changed, there is still a lot of truth in the above statement.

So you could argue that there is a case for prescribing cheap placebo remedies that have no adverse side-effects, such as homeopathy. (Would it really be unethical for doctors simply to put, say, the label 'arnica' on a phial of pure water, thus sparing themselves the effort and expense of acquiring the substance, and the repeated processes of dilution and succussion which result in pure water anyway?)

Speaking for myself, I would be less than impressed. I would not be happy if my doctor did not believe in the nonsense she was prescribing for me and I would not be happy if she did. It seems that Mr Maher wouldn't mind at all.

In fact, this business of placebo prescribing by doctors was in the news more recently. In a survey of 783 doctors by researchers at the Universities of Oxford and Southampton (*note 1*), 12% of UK doctors questioned admitted having used 'pure' placebos - treatments with no active ingredients, including sugar pills or saline injections, and 97%, admitted administering 'impure' placebos, including antibiotics for suspected viral infections, and non-essential physical examinations and blood tests.

Back to Mr Maher's contribution to the debate. If the wheels had not already fallen off his thesis before this, they certainly came off in dramatic fashion at the end of his piece when he announces that quantum physics 'is based more on

belief, theory and expectation than actual visible, tangible evidence (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle anyone?)'. For heaven's sake! Does this man seriously think that much of the extensive technology he now benefits from is not constructed on the basis 'visible tangible evidence'? On that basis, it simply wouldn't work. And is he not aware that, when it comes to putting quantum physics to the test, its accuracy and precision are, in the words of Richard Feynman, equivalent to 'predicting a distance as great as the width of North America to an accuracy of one human hair's breadth'? and what on earth is the significance of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle here (other than as a kind of abracadabra expression that, unless one actually understands it, serves as some vague justification for the impression Mr Maher is struggling to convey)?

Does this man seriously think that much of the extensive technology he now benefits from is not constructed on the basis 'visible tangible evidence'?

Mr Maher's article may be accessed online (*note 2*) plus deservedly unflattering commentary.

Notes

1. <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0058247>. Also search 'placebo' on Google News (ca. 21.3.13).
2. http://www.richarddawkins.net/news_articles/2013/1/28/i-d-rather-be-cured-by-a-placebo-than-rely-on-science-and-remain-ill#

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Welsh heads and phones

Most readers will have seen my piece about spelling reform in the 2012 issue of *Skeptical Intelligencer*. In contrast, rather than advocating reform, speakers of specific languages often adopt partisan, over-simplified folk-linguistic attitudes to the **existing** spelling of their languages. These often involve the idea that the spelling is already ‘perfectly consistent’ (in contrast with the ‘irregular’ English orthography). For instance, Welsh-speakers often claim that the spelling of their mother tongue is ‘perfectly phonetic’ (by this they actually mean ‘phonemic’; see my piece). In fact, those making such claims are typically failing to take into consideration complexities in spelling which, as long-literate native speakers, they themselves take for granted. Thus Welsh spelling, though highly systematic, is **not totally** phonemic. For example, the letter *y* represents different phonemes in different Welsh words, as is exemplified in expressions such as *y dydd* (‘the day’; the first *y* sounds rather like English *a* as in *a day*, the second like the *-ee-* in *seethe*). And the digraphs *ph* and *ff* both represent the phoneme /f/, spelled in English as *f* or (mostly in Greek loanwords) as *ph*. (In Welsh, a single *f* represents /v/.) The Welsh digraph *ph* occurs **only** word-initially in ‘aspirated’ forms of words which in their citation (basic) forms have *p*; these aspirated forms occur in certain grammatical environments. For example, *pen* (‘head’) mutates to *phen* in such environments, for instance in *ei phen* (‘her head’). In **all** other cases of /f/, *ff* is used. This principle is so strongly adhered to that even borrowed words which already have *ph* in English have *ff* instead in Welsh; one such word is *ffôn* (‘telephone’). (The issue does not arise with *c* or *t*, the other consonants which are subject to aspiration, as the normal spelled forms of the phonemes in

question are already *ch* and *th* respectively.) Thus the above-mentioned claims regarding the regularity of Welsh spelling are (slightly) exaggerated.

Spelling reform revisited: some further riders to my *Skeptical Intelligencer* piece

(a) One **advantage** of a phonemic spelling system is that **homography** would disappear: for example, *row* (‘heated argument’) could no longer be spelled the same as *row* (‘propel boat with oars’) and *row* (‘line of items’).

One American phonologist writes that the words clock and talk rhyme in all accents (as they doubtless do in his own!).

(b) The best-known example of French homography is *est* (/e/ = ‘is’) and *est* (/est/ = ‘east’); another example is *os* (/os/; singular, ‘bone’) and *os* (/o/; plural, ‘bones’). And words like the verb-form *portent* would be pronounced with two syllables if they were, for example, adjectives (in such cases the syllable *-ent* – though not its final *-t* – **would** be pronounced).

(c) Re the vowels of *Mary* and *merry*, which are identical in some but not all accents: even linguists can be mistaken about such cases when discussing accents with which they are less familiar. One American phonologist writes that the words *clock* and *talk* rhyme in **all** accents (as they doubtless do in his own!).

(d) It is possible that Chandrasekhar (inventor of Navlipi) proposes symbols incorporating cross-linguistic information because (like very many Indians) he himself is bi-/multilingual.

(e) Seen in an ad on the side of a London bus: **Are You Illiterate? Help Is At Hand!**

Unlearned languages

The reported phenomenon known as xenoglossia involves cases of people (often but not always children) beginning to manifest the ability to speak and/or understand languages which they have never learned – not in a trance, as if channelling spirits or ‘speaking in tongues’, but as a second personality which emerges in everyday situations (and usually does **not** seem to command the language used by the speaker’s main personality). The material apparently emanates from ‘another part’ of the speaker’s own mind. In some reports of xenoglossia the command of the relevant ‘other’ language is reported as only passive (or largely so), but in others active command is reported.

Cases of xenoglossia – and similar cases involving alleged competence in un-learned dialects of a speaker’s first language – have featured in various claims regarding ‘past-life regression’, as discussed by Michael Heap in his editorial in the 2012 issue of *Skeptical Intelligencer* (p. 1). On close analysis, most such cases are, as Heap points out, not at all convincing.

The psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, specifically, claimed several cases of this kind as evidence of reincarnation; the second language is one which was acquired by normal means in a previous lifetime and has somehow been transmitted into the mind of the new incarnation. Of course, this is a possible explanation only if reincarnation itself is a genuine phenomenon; it is rejected both by the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim religion-complex (according to these religions, people survive death but live in **this** world only once) and by contemporary, largely ‘materialistic’ science (according to most scientists, physical death is the end of a person’s existence). Belief in reincarnation is associated with Hinduism, Buddhism

and other originally Asian religions. If reincarnation is indeed the explanation for xenoglossia, this obviously has major consequences for world-views.

If reincarnation is indeed the explanation for xenoglossia, this obviously has major consequences for world-views.

However, the skeptical linguist Sarah Thomason found that Stevenson's reports of fluency and understanding were much exaggerated. The subject's command (active and passive) of the 'other' language is typically minimal and unimpressive (thus a large percentage of the utterances of one supposed German-speaker were either *Ja* or *Nein* and her few longer utterances contained major grammar and vocabulary errors) and could have been based on very limited studies which the subject might have forgotten ('cryptomnesia'). In other such cases, it emerges that the subject **had** in fact had sufficient exposure to the language in question – not always consciously, and without actually studying it – to account for the data (in one case a man who could recite Russian expressions accurately but without any understanding had lived as a child in a block with very thin walls, next door to a home-based Russian-language teacher) – or was familiar with a very closely related language.

In addition, Stevenson's own grasp of linguistics appears limited; he makes some basic conceptual errors, suggesting for instance that the usage of uneducated native speakers of languages cannot be expected to manifest grammar (a folk-linguistic idea).

In his review of Brian Weiss's material on reincarnation in the 2012 issue of *Skeptical Intelligencer*, Jon Danzig refers briefly (p. 18) to Stevenson, who, despite his own undemonstrated claims, was himself suspicious – arguably inconsistently – of the metaphysical theories behind claims

such as those of Weiss. As Danzig notes (p. 17), Weiss himself claims that thousands of cases of this kind are recorded in the scientific literature – which not even Stevenson would have claimed. Danzig also refers to other dubious linguistic aspects of the ideas of Weiss, notably the reported uttering of putatively Gaelic words (p. 17).

In some special cases of xenoglossia involving older forms of the same language rather than different languages, there is an unconvincing mixture of contemporary usage and attempts at archaic forms; see for instance the case of the Bloxham Tapes, made under hypnosis and allegedly relating to past-life experiences. (See again Heap's recent *Skeptical Intelligencer* editorial [p. 1], on other issues arising in the Bloxham case.) And in one extreme (and unverified) case, it was reported that a 13-year old Croatian awoke from a one-day coma no longer able to speak her native language but instead communicating in German (which she had not learned). Such cases have at times been attributed to demonic possession – although reincarnation might again be adduced instead.

Some groups of religious believers also claim that they are able to speak and understand languages which they have never learned. This has been reported in conversation with me by followers of the 'new religion' Subud in New Zealand and Scotland; but unfortunately these people are uninterested in demonstrating the truth of their claims, seeing their abilities as 'sacred' and not wanting to have them subjected to critical analysis.

The multiple-personality phenomenon is itself an intriguing matter; psychologists are uncertain as to how far it is genuine, but some cases appear dramatic, notably those such as that of 'Christine the Strawberry Girl' (as described in song by Siouxsie & The Banshees!), who manifested a striking variety of personas. I myself knew someone who appeared to have two very different personas who were in this case aware of each other to a degree; the

secondary personality was much 'wilder' than the main one, and this woman would reportedly awake at times to find scribbled notes from herself bearing messages such as 'If you feel crap this morning it's because I had ten gin-&-tonics, and you might think of having a pregnancy test'. (See Heap's recent *Skeptical Intelligencer* editorial [p. 1] on the work of Nicholas Spanos on multiple identities, including cases involving alleged reincarnation.)

In earlier instalments I have discussed the claims of writers such as Gavin Menzies, Cyclone Covey and Ior Bock who offer various quite different explanations of cases where understanding of languages (mutually or in one direction only) is said to obtain in surprising circumstances.

Language-teaching books often remark on supposedly unique features of the target language or of the learner's presumed first language.

Exaggerating the differences

Language-teaching books often remark on supposedly unique features of the target language or of the learner's presumed first language. For example, it is often said that English is unique in using an auxiliary verb (*do*) in negatives (*I do not know*; compare Italian *io non so*, literally 'I not know', German *ich weiss nicht* 'I know not', etc.) and questions (*do you speak Russian?*). However, in a language as familiar as Finnish, negatives require an auxiliary verb, in this case a 'dedicated' verb meaning, as it were, 'to not' (*en tule*, 'I do not come', literally 'not-I to-come'). So such forms, while not especially common across the world, are hardly 'unique'!

Another example where differences between languages are overstated (this time by linguists!) seems to arise from the desire not to 'disrespect' the speakers of creole languages. These are languages having native speakers but

descended from ‘pidgin’ languages used for communication between groups lacking a common language, often originally in colonial contexts including the slave trade. There is a tendency to analyse features of these languages as grammatically very different from the features of the source languages from which they are ultimately derived; these source languages are often those of the former colonisers. But this does not **always** appear justified. One such item is *tiek* or *tek*, derived from English *take* and employed in constructions in some English-based creoles (used in the Caribbean and in originally Caribbean communities in the UK) such as *Tek rieza blied kot it aaf*. This sentence obviously corresponds with English *Take a razor blade [and] cut it off*, and has the same meaning. However, some linguists re-interpret *tek* as a preposition, and gloss the creole sentences in question in terms such as ‘Cut it off with a razor blade’. There seems no strictly linguistic reason to adopt this grammatical analysis in preference to interpreting *tek* as still being a verb similar in function to English *take*, especially given that if *tek* really were a preposition one would also expect alternative orderings such as *Kot it aaf tek rieza blied* – which do not seem to occur. It appears more than possible that the structural links between English and contemporary English-based creoles are being downplayed for political reasons.

I don’t, but I can

Like their near-equivalents in some other languages, all of the English ‘modal’ verbs (the ‘core’ modals are *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, *may*, *might* and *must*) have ranges of meanings. For example, *She must be at home tonight* can mean either ‘she is

obliged to be at home tonight’ or ‘it is certain that she is at home tonight’. This diversity of meaning greatly confuses foreign learners (who often avoid using the modals) and helps to generate divergent usage in English-as-a-second-language communities such as Singapore; indeed, there is also some variation across native-speaker varieties, including differences between the standard usage in the USA, the UK, etc. Entire books have been written on this matter!

She must be at home tonight can mean either ‘she is obliged to be at home tonight’ or ‘it is certain that she is at home tonight’.

One interesting case involves forms such as *can speak* [a language], which are sometimes replaced by the main verb on its own (*I speak Thai*). Now one normally assumes that those who are able to speak a language do speak it; but this is not always the case. One linguist met an elderly Lakota (Sioux) lady who had been adopted as a lost child by a non-Lakota group and had not used her Lakota for many years but proved to be still fluent when (to her delight) the linguist displayed interest. And genuine ambiguity can sometimes arise here. In one of the horse-racing novels of Dick Francis, a British equine expert sent to Moscow to investigate some skulduggery is taken out on the town by a locally-based Brit (in fact an agent) who tells him that he does not speak Russian. Later this man translates something that was said in Russian in their hearing. The main character says, ‘I thought you said you didn’t speak

Russian’; the other replies ‘No, I don’t – but I **can**!’

Philosophically blonde?

The names of persons can become attached to objects associated with them. It is not uncommon, for example, for the names of famous relevant scholars to be conferred upon university buildings and such (thus, Lancaster University has a Ruskin Library). But things are not always as they seem. The linguist Roy Harris was once conducting an undergraduate acquaintance, visiting from the UK, around the philosophy department at Harvard. His companion remarked: ‘So cute! They’ve named the offices after famous American philosophers!’ Harris had to explain that in fact the names over the doors referred to the **occupants** of the rooms!

Oh no, not freight!

A young Hong Kong woman once fell out with her British boyfriend when he explained that he would be having lunch with another girl he knew (who worked in his building) and then going to his flat to attend to some freight (goods he was sending back to the UK). Not knowing the word *freight* and too nervous to ask, she put two and two together and made a thousand. In high dudgeon she went out and got drunk, injuring herself in a fall and eventually collapsing after barely reaching her home. Later her beloved, concerned as to her whereabouts (this was in pre-mobile days), phoned her. She told him she was never going to see him again. ‘Why not?’ ‘I hate you! You had freight with that girl!’ (The same girl once accused the same boyfriend of ‘screwing women in pubs at lunchtime’, having somehow come to believe that *screw* meant ‘talk to’!)

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

ASKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to the ECSO website (below).

Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380
Roßdorf, Germany

Tel.: +49 6154/695021

Fax: +49 6154/695022

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

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

The 15th European Skeptics Congress

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

From the Swedish Skeptics Association. (Föreningen Vetenskap och Folkbildning):

The organisers invite science-friendly people worldwide to the 15th European Skeptics Conference, 23-25 August 2013, in Stockholm, Sweden.

Conference language

English

Registration

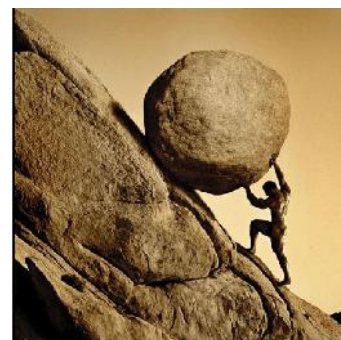
Online registration is now up and running at <http://euroscepticscon.org/>.

The 16th European Skeptics Congress

This will take place in London in 2015 and will be hosted by ASKE. It is hoped that other related organisations will also be involved. Please contact ASKE if you have any ideas or wish to be involved.

The Sisyphus Prize

This is to remind you of the 1 million euro prize awarded by the Belgian Skeptics Society SKEPP to anyone able



Sisyphus

to demonstrate paranormal abilities under strict scientifically controlled conditions. Details for entering this, including the pre-trial test in the applicant's country, are provided in the Autumn 2012 *Skeptical Adversaria* and on the ASKE website.

OF INTEREST

SCEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Tenth Anniversary Timeline

Key events and publications, with views from some of the Trustees. At:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/our-story.html>

Celebrities and Science Review 2012

'Once again we have been charting the rise and fall of celebrity fads, endorsements and claims about science and evidence. We've asked scientists to review a selection of the dubious claims sent to us throughout the year. This is not just an opportunity to talk science to the latest fads – celebrity comments travel far and fast, so it's important they talk sense about issues like dangerous dieting and medical treatments.' At:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/resources.php/111/2012-celebrities-and-science>

Ask for Evidence USA

From Sense about Science:

(Recently) the VoYS (*Voice of Young Scientists*) USA network of early career researchers came together and launched the US Ask for Evidence campaign at MIT Museum in Boston MA. The network is growing rapidly in the US and has planned a series of activities to encourage people to ask about science and evidence in discussions about everything from changing weather patterns to "superfoods", vaccinations, alternative medicine and radiation. They want to hear from anyone interested in supporting them or being involved. Email Morgan Thompson, US Coordinator in MA':

MThompson@senseaboutscience.org

Umbrage on a Grand Scale

Scientist Rongxiang Xu, who wrote in 2003, 'I did not conduct scientific researches for any prizes, as "God" had endowed me with this mission and the enthusiasm; all I could do was realize my true value as a human being' is now suing the Nobel Assembly for not giving him a Nobel Prize! They were unaccountably bothered that he had never published in a peer-reviewed journal. At:

<http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/34705/title/Stubbed-for-a-Nobel/>

Journal of Exceptional Experiences and Psychology

'We are an online, international journal that caters to both the research community and society at large. JEEP is dedicated to the exploration of exceptional experiences, such as

survival after death, out-of-body experiences, extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, poltergeists, mediumship, and hauntings. Also included are cryptids, abduction scenarios, possession, psychic healing and synchronicity. Exceptional psychology encourages a clinical and therapeutic approach to exceptional experiences. In this regard, it mostly comes from a phenomenological stand point, in that it is not so much concerned with proof (although proof oriented research has importance), but is focused on how the experience has affected/is affecting the person subjectively. JEEP encourages the submission of research manuscripts, personal accounts, creative writing, artwork, and video, as well as book reviews, news, and events.' At:

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

SCIENTIFIC TOPICS)

GM Crops: A Change of Opinion

'If you fear genetically modified food, you may have Mark Lynas to thank. Thanks to the efforts of Lynas and people like him, governments around the world—especially in Western Europe, Asia, and Africa—have hobbled GM research, and NGOs like Greenpeace have spurned donations of genetically modified foods. But Lynas has changed his mind—and he's not being quiet about it.' At:

http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2013/01/03/mark_lynas_environmentalist_who_opposed_gmos_admits_he_was_wrong.html

GM Crops: Your Questions Answered

The following has been issued by Sense About Science: to signatories of the 'Don't Destroy Research' petition in support of researchers at Rothamsted.

'Sense About Science has worked with public sector plant science researchers across the UK to develop an online plant science panel. This is a single point of contact for you and others to raise points and questions, and view those that others have raised. The panel has been responding to questions

Skeptical Intelligencer, Spring 2013

about a viral DNA fragment in GM food, daisies blooming in January, sustainable intensification of UK agriculture, the future of deciduous trees in the face of global warming and much more.'

You can put questions on any aspect of plant science by email:

plantsci@senseaboutscience.org

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/plant-science-expert-panel.html>

Twitter to @senseaboutsci using #plantsci'

And a more recent message:

'This has been a busy week for the panel. The latest questions put to them are: Can plant roots take up nanoparticles? Do you think the European fear and distrust of genetic modification in food crops is dying down? Do plant breeders feel that their work, or the speedy exploitation of their innovations, can be blocked by the patents of Big Corp (Monsanto, perhaps)? The value of the contributions is increased by more people interacting with it. Can you alert friends and colleagues by forwarding the note at the end of this email? Please email me if you want an image for a link on a website.'

Dihydrogen Monoxide

Keep abreast of the increasing evidence of the perils of dihydrogen monoxide and the campaign against this dangerous chemical. At:

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

Iran's Space Programme

'Is Iran's space monkey a fake? Iran's triumphant claim that it successfully sent a monkey into space may have been nothing more than hot air.'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9842580/Is-Irans-space-monkey-a-fake.html>

MEDICINE (GENERAL)

The Nightingale Collaboration

A flurry of activity by the Nightingale Collaboration since the Winter 2012 issue has resulted in some notable victories in the campaign against

quackery and the promotion of dubious medical practices and products, too numerous to mention here. Here is the audit from one of their latest newsletter:

'With 52 CAP Code breaches in eight adjudications on ten adverts and complaints on eleven adverts informally resolved, we now have a further five still to be resolved. There have now been several resolved complaints about supplements making claims that mentioned medical conditions in breach of the CAP Code and these advertisers now have an ASA adjudication against them or have been informally resolved. We have already reported an advertiser of a medical device to the medicines regulator (the MHRA) after they refused to acknowledge the ASA as a competent authority. If other advertisers don't withdraw or amend adverts to make them CAP Code compliant, will further complaints have to be made?'

Now the Nightingale collaboration is asking for **your** help in submitting complaints to the Complementary and Healthcare Council. 'It is clear that, however well intentioned the CNHC may be, they are not being vigilant enough about what their registrants are claiming. If registrants are making claims that cannot be substantiated with good evidence, their customers cannot give their fully informed consent to treatment and that is a critical breach of their Code of Conduct, Performance and Ethics.

'So, we need to make them aware of the extent of these claims and we want to see how they deal with registrants as a test of their professionalism and ability to properly protect the public.'

Please visit the website for the complaints protocol. And if you do not already do so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter? At:

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

‘All Trials’ Petition

From Sense About Science:

‘Patient organisations, from Patients Involved in NICE group, have signed the AllTrials petition. More organisations are signing every day’ at:

<http://www.alltrials.net/supporters>.

‘Thank you for your efforts across many countries to get your organisations to sign, please keep that up. The UK’s House of Commons Science and Technology Committee’s review of clinical trials is taking submissions and evidence until 22nd February. European regulations are now being reviewed and we are urging retrospective registration and disclosure for past trials relating to current treatments, building on the industry lead given by GSK last week.

‘GSK has become the first pharmaceutical company to sign. They announced that they will publish their clinical trials going back to their formation as a company. This makes a reality of beginning a global change in publication of trial results. We need your help to publicise the petition at AllTrials.net, your continued advice about the best ways to achieve a consistent global standard and we really welcome individual donations at <https://www.justgiving.com/alltrials>.’

HealthWatch

‘HealthWatch has received a donation of £50,000 from a private individual who supports our aims and objectives, who has no connection with the pharmaceutical industry, nor any financial interest in any complementary or other therapy or treatment, to establish a research fund. Applications are now invited for support for projects that meet the aims and objectives of HealthWatch. The deadline for applications for the first tranche of funding is 1st June 2013.’ Further information is available under the ‘Research’ tab on the HealthWatch website:

<http://www.healthwatch-uk.org>

Andrew Wakefield

Andrew Wakefield, discredited over autism-MMR vaccine link claims, has received the inaugural Golden Duck award for lifetime achievement in quackery by the Good Thinking Society, set up by Simon Singh. Runners-up for the award were Prince Charles and David Tredinnick MP. At:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/dec/23/struck-off-mmr-doctor-quackery-award>

‘Homeopathy is Rubbish’

England’s chief medical officer tells the Commons Science and Technology committee that homeopathy ‘is rubbish.’ At:

<http://humanism.org.uk/2013/01/24/englands-chief-medical-officer-tells-commons-science-and-technology-committee-that-homeopathy-is-rubbish/>

Majority support for homeopathy in Britain?

Article by Paul Stoneman and Patrick Sturgis from the NCRM Hub, University of Southampton. ‘Using data from the 2009 Wellcome Trust Monitor, we found that 18% of UK adults report having used homeopathy at some point in the past. However, when asked their reasons for using it, only 16% spontaneously reported it being due to its superior efficacy relative to conventional treatments.’ At:

www.ncrm.ac.uk

‘Melanie’s Marvellous Measles’

A children’s book by an anti-vaccinationist informing its readers that measles is good for them. At:

<http://naturematters.info/>

For review and comments see:

<http://www.skeptical.org/2013/01/a-review-of-melanies-marvellous-measles/>
Meanwhile...

Measles outbreak in Pakistan in 2012

‘An international health body says that measles killed more than 300 children in Pakistan.

‘Measles cases in 2012 have surged by almost five times of that the previous year, leading to the deaths of hundreds

of children, according to an international health body. Maryam Yunus, a spokeswoman for the World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Tuesday that 306 children died in Pakistan because of the infectious disease in 2012, a dramatic surge from the 64 children in 2011. The WHO said the jump was most pronounced in southern Sindh province, where measles killed 210 children in 2012. Twenty-eight children died there the year before. The organisation did not give a reason for the increase in deaths, but a provincial health official in Sindh said that the disease hit areas where poor families did not vaccinate their children.’

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/20131282648859762.html>

But there is good news elsewhere:

No Reported Cases of Measles in South Korea in 2012

‘The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says not one case of measles was reported in South Korea last year. The disease control agency tentatively estimated on Wednesday that not one person contracted measles last year nationwide, noting two people were infected abroad. The disease control agency said the rate of vaccination for measles stands at more than 98 per cent of South Korea’s population.’ At:

http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/news/news_Dm_detail.htm?lang=e&id=Dm&No=96392¤t_page

Under-vaccination in the US

Under-vaccination is an increasing trend among US children, with alternative vaccination schedules becoming more popular. Compared to age-appropriately vaccinated children, under-vaccinated children access outpatient care less but inpatient care more. At:

<http://www.2minutemedicine.com/under-vaccination-becoming-more-common-associated-with-lower-outpatient-health-care-utilization/>

‘Detoxing’

‘By all means go dry for January, but it’s worth knowing that “detoxing” does nothing for your health’ by Tom

Chivers. 'Particularly idiotic are the "detox kits" that you can buy from various outlets, which are, as far as I can work out, purest quackery, especially anything which uses the word "quantum".' At:

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tomchiversscience/100196097/by-all-means-go-dry-for-january-but-its-worth-knowing-that-detoxing-does-nothing-for-your-health/>

The Miracle Hour Show

'TV shows made in London that encourage viewers to believe they are cured of life-threatening illnesses by prayer have been condemned by charities. Charities criticised an episode of the Miracle Hour show, on Faith World TV, during which a diabetic caller was told he was "set free" from the disease.' At:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-21505191>

PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOLOGY

British False Memory Society

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

The 19th BFMS Annual General Meeting takes place on Saturday April 13th at 11.00 a.m. in London W1. 'Speakers include: Dr Charles Fernyhough, author of *Pieces of Light: The new science of memory*, published by Profile Books 2012 who will talk about Memory, Narrative and Imagination; Ian Hynes, retired police officer of ITS Ltd who will speak about the impact of false memory and the practical appliance of science in a major crime investigation; and a father who will talk about restoring family life after accusations.

False Memories

A project collecting people's false memories. At:

<http://falsememoryarchive.com/>

Out-of-Body-Experiences

Two papers by Jason Braithwaite on the hallucinatory components underlying out-of-body experiences

'Evidence for elevated cortical hyperexcitability and its association with

Skeptical Intelligencer, Spring 2013

out-of-body experiences in the non-clinical population: New findings from a pattern-glare task' At:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0010945211002978#>

'Signs of increased cortical hyperexcitability selectively associated with spontaneous anomalous bodily experiences in a nonclinical population' At:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23441857>

Sleep Paralysis

As announced in the Winter 2012 issue.

Keep up to date at:

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

RESEARCH

Superstition

From O Jiaqing, Department of Psychology, College of Medicine, Biology and Environment Australian National University Canberra ACT 0200, Email: o.j@anu.edu.au

'I am a PhD student from the Australian National University who is doing a large cross-cultural study in an attempt to better understand the nature of superstitious and/or religious coping styles in dealing with pressure in life and their resulting outcomes among working adults (in various occupations) in the United Kingdom. To this end, I am seeking to elicit as many responses as possible from any working adult (such as you) who is kind enough to spare just a moment of your time to complete this anonymous online questionnaire.'

The link to the study is:

https://anupsyh.us.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_cwFNzCXPCT1Lv7e

RELIGION

Atheists in Arizona

Arizona Republicans propose bill that would not allow atheists to graduate high school. At:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2013/01/25/arizona-republicans-propose-bill-that-would-not-allow-atheists-to-graduate-high-school/>

The Sunday Assembly

'The Sunday Assembly is a godless congregation that will meet on the first Sunday of every month to hear great talks, sing songs and generally celebrate the wonder of life. It's a service for anyone who wants to live better, help often and wonder more. Come on down to hear inspirational speakers and to enjoy a morning that is part-foot stomping show, part-atheist church.' At:

<http://sundayassembly.com/>

OTHER UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Big Cat Sightings

Reports of a black panther roaming the streets of Peterborough turned out to be a stuffed toy. At:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-21012066>

Colorado Researchers Say DNA Proves Bigfoot Is Real

'Bigfoot is real. That's according to a group of Colorado researchers who say they have hard evidence proving its existence. Researcher Dave Paulides is convinced the reality of Bigfoot isn't as fuzzy as the photos from people who claim to have seen the mythological creature. "This DNA is like nothing else in the world," Paulides said. Paulides says Bigfoot looks approximately 7 to 8 feet tall and weighs in at a whopping 800 to 1,000 pounds. Paulides says his research group has collected hundreds of samples of DNA evidence. He focused his search in Northern California's redwoods. He says strands of hair are from a Sasquatch, genetically tested to reveal a previously unknown species. "This isn't an animal. This is a subspecies of a human, and we believe they travel in groups", Paulides said'. Ah! Yes but.....

'Not a single research institution in the country has confirmed the DNA test results.' See:

<http://denver.cbslocal.com/2013/02/13/colorado-researchers-say-dna-proves-bigfoot-is-real/>

More Exciting than Mythical Beasts

Something much more exciting than imagined monsters:

‘Scientists exploring a “lost world” near Loch Ness have discovered a host of tiny creatures never before recorded in the UK.’ At:

<http://news.sky.com/story/1060150/loch-ness-tiny-monsters-in-lost-world>

Coincidentally:

‘A walrus has been spotted on a beach in Scotland, and it’s said to be the area’s first sighting of the arctic mammal in more than 20 years.’ At:

<http://uk.reuters.com/video/2013/03/05/rare-sighting-of-walrus-in-scotland-draw?videoId=241454064&videoChannel=77>

Skeptical Intelligencer, Spring 2013

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy Theories Website

Visit the Psychology of Conspiracy Theories Website compiled by four PhD students researching this topic. At:

<http://conspiracypsych.com/about/>

Barrack Obama’s Birthplace

Sixty-Four per cent of Republicans think President Obama is hiding info about his place of birth. At:

http://www.salon.com/2013/01/17/poll_64_of_republicans_are_birthers/

Moon Landing

S.G. Collins ‘is not sure if men went to the moon, but he is sure they could not have faked it’. At:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGXTF6bs1IU&sns=em>

FREEDOM

KEEP LIBEL LAWS OUT OF SCIENCE

Libel Laws

The legal battle with disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong, which cost the *Sunday Times* almost £1m after it suggested he took banned substances, shows how difficult it is to pursue investigations under British libel laws. At:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2013/jan/22/uk-libel-laws-sunday-times-lance-armstrong>

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH’S COLLEGE LONDON

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

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/events/goldsmiths>

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room LGO1 in the New Academic Building, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. Talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book.

You are strongly recommended to register (at no cost) with the APRU’s ‘Psychology of the Paranormal’ email list to ensure that you are informed of any changes to the programme. Visit:

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

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

or

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

THE 2013 EUROPEAN SKEPTICS CONGRESS

See ‘The European Scene’, earlier.

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

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

Choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events (and information on any associated local sceptic group). Current venues are now so numerous there is almost bound to be a meeting near you.

LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

<http://forteanlondon.blogspot.co.uk/>
www.facebook.com/LondonForteanSociety

The society meets on the last Thursday of each month, except July and December, upstairs at The Bell, 50 Middlesex Street, London E1 7EX, 7.30pm for 8pm start. £3 or £2 concessional.’

25 April: Rupert Sheldrake *The science delusion: Freeing the spirit of enquiry* (Advanced booking only).

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

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

See the website for upcoming events of interest to sceptics.

CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

<http://conwayhall.org.uk/talks-lectures>

15 April: Robert Brotherton *Beware! The vaccine A brief history of anti-vaccinationism*

11.00 a.m. £3 on the door/free to members

18 April: Chris French *Weird science: An introduction to anomalistic psychology*

6.30 p.m. for a 7.00 p.m. start. Free but donation welcome

28 April: Will Storr *Adventures with the enemies of science*

Journalist and author, Will Storr, investigates how humans develop the processes of self-deception and science denial.

11.00 a.m. £3 on the door/free to member

THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY (ASKE)

- 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.

About ASKE

Founded in 1997, ASKE is an association of people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly magazine and newsletter. To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk

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email: aske1@talktalk.net;
website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>.