

# *THE SKEPTICAL* *INTELLIGENCER*



The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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*Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter*

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**Edited by Michael Heap**

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## 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.

Authors should submit an electronic, double-spaced copy of their article or letter.

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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### *Editor's Announcement*

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* is a quarterly magazine and incorporates the previously quarterly ASKE newsletter, the *Skeptical Adversaria*. Paper editions are available on request (see front page). 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.

## FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

What events of interest to skeptics have been in the news since the last issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*? Let me remind you of some of them (with a UK bias). Where none is given, links to the item can be found in 'Of Interest' later in this issue.

In Swansea we have witnessed the continuation and resolution of the measles outbreak caused by the failure of parents to have their children vaccinated. This was largely owing to unfounded fears of a link between the MMR vaccine and autism due to the discredited research of Dr Andrew Wakefield. Unrepentant, Dr Wakefield was allowed to defend himself in an article in the *Independent*, in which he claimed that the measles outbreak had proved that he had been right. Meanwhile parents in Swansea have been making sure that their children are now properly protected. See:

<http://www.thisissouthwales.co.uk/Swansea-measles-outbreak-finally-contained-say/story-19405198-detail/story.html#axzz2ZlducToH>.

Another disturbing consequence of a failure to be guided by science emerged from the conviction of fraud of British businessman James McCormick who is said to have made £50m from sales of a bomb detector that supposedly operated on principles no more advanced than dowsing rods and for which impossible claims were made. The devices turned out to be useless. Yet some of those who purchased them still insist that they are effective (cf. Dr Wakefield's response above).

If you are keen for research into the pros and cons of genetically modified crops to continue and for a rational attitude to prevail, then you will have mixed feelings about recent developments. In June, Environment Secretary Mr Owen Paterson spoke enthusiastically and in a refreshingly informed manner about the potential benefits of cultivating GM crops in the UK, declaring that they are probably

safer than 'conventional' plants. He said the next generation of GM crops offers the 'most wonderful opportunities to improve human health'. See:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-22967571>.

Since then, however, Monsanto, one of the world's biggest and best known GM crop companies, has announced that it is 'no longer seeking approval to commercialise biotech seeds in the EU' out of frustration with the lengthy approval process. 'Monsanto currently sells only one biotech seed product in Europe — a biotech corn which is modified to be resistant to a destructive pest called the European corn borer. It accounts for less than one per cent of the corn grown in the EU'. See:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/environment/10186932/Major-GM-food-company-Monsanto-pulls-out-of-Europe.html>.

One person who will be delighted at this news is our future head of state, Prince Charles. His response to our elected government's wish to develop GM technology is, according to 'a Clarence House spokesman' that he remains implacably opposed to so-called 'Frankenstein food'. See:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/theroyalfamily/10122679/Prince-Charles-warns-over-risky-GM-food.html>.

Prince Charles has also recently been reported to have had a private meeting with the Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt in which NHS funding for homeopathy was *believed* to be on the agenda. It is well-known that for many years, and contrary to the standards of conduct expected of him when he assumes the Throne, the prince has regularly abused

his position by lobbying our elected politicians in order to promote his ideas on alternative medicine, the environment, education, and so on. Yet, the British public are not entitled to know anything at all about these activities.

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***Attorney General, Mr Dominic Grieve, stopped the release of letters the prince had written to the government in an attempt to influence policy decisions.***

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In 2004 and 2005 the then Attorney General, Mr Dominic Grieve, stopped the release of letters the prince had written to the government in an attempt to influence policy decisions. More recently, Guardian journalist Rob Evans asked for a judicial review of this. The decision to block the 27 letters has now been upheld in the High Court. The letters were sent to ministers at seven government departments: Business, Innovation and Skills; Health; Children, Schools and Families; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Culture, Media and Sport; the Northern Ireland Office and the Cabinet Office. The judges ruled that the public **has no right to know** the contents of letters he had written to ministers. Mr Grieve said that making the letters public could potentially damage the principle of the heir to the throne being politically neutral, and therefore undermine his ability to fulfil his duties as King (*then why the hell did he write them in the first place? – Ed.*). The judges said it was a 'an exceptional case meriting use of the ministerial veto to prevent disclosure and to safeguard

the public interest' (*HRH's more likely – Ed.*). See:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23240592>.

Meanwhile, the final tranche of UFO files has been released by the National Archives. This contain 'a wide range of UFO-related documents, drawings, letters, photos and parliamentary questions covering the final two years of the Ministry of Defence's UFO Desk

(from late 2007 until November 2009)'. At:

<http://ufos.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>.

Finally the Defamation Bill is waiting for Royal Assent to become law. After four years of campaigning for this, Tracey Brown of Sense About Science said, 'A campaign of small organisations, thousands of individuals and good parliamentarians has achieved changes that were denied to citizens and publishers for a century. We didn't have

resources but we had the weight of mounting injustice and the pressure from citizens to talk freely about their society, evidence, culture and the behaviour of powerful people within it. There are many compromises in the Defamation Act. But restrictions on trivial claims, a stronger defence of fair comment, and a new public interest defence will help writers everywhere to decide what to publish based on 'is it true?' rather than "will they sue?"

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

Working out how various members of an extended family are related draws on the ability to envisage what the Russian neuropsychologist A.R Luria called quasi-spatial relationships (as well as knowledge of the linguistic labels for these relationships). Such skills are associated with the parietal area of the dominant hemisphere of the brain. Early in my professional career I was involved in testing brain-damaged patients and one of the signs of a possible lesion in this area was undue difficulty solving problems such as 'What relation to you is your father's mother's daughter?' Like solving mental arithmetic problems (which are also affected by damage to the same area) this kind of question may elicit the response 'I could probably do it if you gave me a pencil and paper'.

Two problems on relationships follow. The first one is based on a true story but I have changed the names of the participants. I should mention that at the time of the story there were no half-siblings or step-relations in the family.

### **My mother's aunt**

I have a family photograph of an old lady with a tiny baby on her knee. The lady is my late mother. I once showed the photograph to my brother's son, Jamie, saying that I remember very well the day I took it. My wife and I had been with my mother to see her aunt Mary who was then in an old persons' home. Aunt Mary was in good spirits but sadly did not know who any of us were. We then called in on my sister's son Steven and his wife to see the latest addition to our family, Katy. Katy is the baby in the photograph. Many years have passed since then and recently I heard that Katy herself has had a baby, a daughter named Emma.

Now for two questions. First, what relation is Mary to Emma? Second, what relation is Jamie to Emma? The answers are at the end of this section.

### **Two men in a pub**

Some people have no problem with these kinds of questions; others find them fiendishly difficult. The next one is

a bit trickier (and does not concern my own family).

Two men were sitting in a pub and they noticed two women enter. They both exclaimed, 'I'll have to go – my wife and my daughter have just come in'. How do you account for that? (Try to resist reaching for pen and paper). Again the answer is below.

### **Win a scholarship to Eton**

The Eton College King's Scholarship Examination for 2011 can be found online at:

<http://www.etoncollege.com/userfiles/file/KS%202011%20General%20Paper%201.pdf>

Answers to 'My mother's aunt':

**Mary is Emma's great great aunt and Jamie and Emma are first cousins twice removed**

Answer to 'Two men in a pub':

**The two men are widowers who each married the daughter of the other.**

## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

### Placebo Prescribing - Follow-ups

I have had a couple of follow-ups to my previous 'Medicine on the Fringe' piece. Firstly, in relation to homeopathy Niall Taylor emailed me with reference to my question '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?' According to Niall, '(This) actually describes a recognised method of producing homeopathic remedies. In all seriousness, some homs say that if you write the name of a remedy on a bit of paper and leave it under a glass of water for a few hours the water will be magically transformed into the desired remedy. So there you have it - never try to "out-mad" a homeopath - they are always there before you!'

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**'Never try to "out-mad" a homeopath - they are always there before you!'**

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Secondly, in relation to my reference to the recent survey by researchers at the Universities of Oxford and Southampton on the use of placebo treatments by doctors, Alan Henness of the Nightingale Foundation has written saying, 'I hope you've seen the criticism of that placebo paper? It was partly funded/written by Prof George Lewith's complementary medicine group (and, bizarrely, Carl Henegan at the Centre for EBM [Evidence-Based Medicine] at Oxford), but there are many serious objections to the way it has been portrayed in the media'. E.g, see:

Doctors, Placebos and Damned Statistics! At:

<http://www.skeptical.gb.net/blog/?p=360>

3

and

Do 97% of UK Doctors Prescribe Placebos? At:

<http://theness.com/neurologicablog/index.php/do-97-of-uk-doctors-prescribe-placebos/>

and

Behold the spin! What a new survey of placebo prescribing really tells us At: <http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/behold-the-spin-what-a-new-survey-of-placebo-prescribing-really-tells-us/>

### The Value of the Suck-It-And-See Method

There was a panel discussion at a recent skeptics' conference during which the need to rely on proper randomised control trials to demonstrate a treatment's effectiveness was emphasised in contrast to publicity and hype. A member of the audience – a physiotherapist I think – then raised the point (I may not have got this quite right) that she was trying to encourage the availability of yoga on the NHS for back pain. However, she had been informed that this required a proper controlled clinical trial, the cost of which would be around £400,000. She contrasted this with Pilates, whose practitioners recommend it for back pain and which is very popular, more as a result of publicity in the media than controlled clinical trials.

What our friend was saying at the meeting is in accordance with the general position that skeptics take for any claims of treatment efficacy. And yet ..... Why did I feel compelled to suppress an audible groan at what was being said? Certainly not because I do not believe that yoga exercises can be effective for alleviating chronic backache and back pain. Up to about a year ago I had long suffered from what most of the time was relatively mild low backache. On a few occasions this was bad enough to slow my walking

pace and twice I have suffered really nagging upper back pain which, unusually for me, sent me to my doctor, who just told me it would go away on its own. (I also had a 'frozen shoulder' quite a while back.) Then I read that simple stretching exercises on a regular basis may help. There was a time in my younger days when I practised yoga regularly on my own (working from a paperback book) and so I resumed doing some of the procedures at home about every other day. And I haven't really been troubled since.

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***We should be careful not to underestimate the value of the suck-it-and-see method, even as a substitute for randomised controlled trials.***

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Of course I can't use this anecdote as reliable evidence for the efficacy of yoga (i.e. stretching exercises) for back pain and it may even be that my improvement has nothing to do with it. But I have no reason to be other than pleased with the outcome. Moreover, my self-treatment did not cost the NHS anything (had I taken painkillers my prescriptions would have been entirely free) and I have the bonus from the lift I have derived from knowing that I can claim some ownership of the 'cure' for my problem.

So, I believe we should be careful not to underestimate the value of the suck-it-and-see method, even as a substitute for randomised controlled trials. One often hears people telling the story of how they suffered from some condition for such a long time and after having all the treatments available on the NHS decided to try an alternative which seemed to do the trick (by 'alternative' I don't necessarily mean fringe remedies ['CAM'], though these could be included).

Wouldn't it be a good thing for the efficacy of such treatments to be tested by controlled clinical trials? Not necessarily. In the first place, if public money is proposed for funding such trials there has to be a good reason for doing them and the opinions of the practitioners and the testimonials of their patients are not sufficient reason. One prerequisite is that there has to be a good *a priori* rationale for the treatment, and this excludes virtually all of CAM.

But what about yoga? Surely there is sufficient reason for considering that this could be an effective treatment for back pain and that time and money spent on conducting clinical trials would be well worthwhile?

I would argue that there is a range of treatment methods that, while they may be potentially effective, do not lend themselves well to controlled clinical trials and are better offered or suggested to patients on the basis that 'we have good reason to believe that this can help some people with your problem; why not try it and see'. Let's think about why this can be the case.

The regular practice of methods such as yoga, physical exercise and meditation is commonly cited, even within mainstream medical practice, as being therapeutic for a wide range of physical and psychological conditions. Two common characteristics of these are that the patient is required to actively do something (as opposed to, say, swallowing pills or stopping smoking) and he or she has to set time aside to do them. They may or may not be immediately rewarding for a patient; that is some people enjoy doing these activities for their own sake, whereas others may find them a chore. So, patient motivation to engage in the treatment is going to be a major factor affecting any chance of a positive outcome, and dropout rates may be quite high. This is a big complication if you are conducting a carefully controlled clinical trial.

Another complication is the problem of what constitutes an appropriate

control group – you'll want one of these if your research is going to be of any use. Some researchers use a waiting list group (which might actually correspond to a 'treatment as usual' group). This may be sufficient for some problems but others, and I would put chronic pain amongst them, are particularly sensitive to placebo effects (*see note 1*). So if you want to make a more thorough job of it, you'll need a placebo group. No problem if you are administering pills. But what constitutes a convincing placebo to match physical exercise or meditation? I don't think it's possible to answer this.

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***Your research may demonstrate that your treatment has beneficial effects, but this doesn't guarantee its uptake by practitioners in the Health Service.***

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Having decided to have some kind of control group you then have the complication that the participants in a clinical trial of these kinds of procedures cannot be 'blind' as to the treatment they are receiving; neither can those administering the treatment. Contrast this with the administration of some medicine.

But you insist on going ahead with your clinical trial and you are awarded a grant to do this. You have a good chance of demonstrating that your participants – let's say back pain sufferers – benefited from your treatment – let's say yoga. What next?

Assuming you have published your paper, it will then take its place amongst the not inconsiderable reservoir of clinical research papers on back pain that demonstrate a beneficial effect of one treatment or another. How many people will read it and who? Probably a small number of people who are favourable to your treatment and are keen to develop it. To the extent that anyone does read your paper, what will

be the consensus conclusion as to the value of your research? Usually: 'Promising results .... the study has the following limitations .... more research is necessary to show that ...' etc., etc.

Of course, the aforementioned appraisal very commonly greets even highly sophisticated clinical trials (*see note 2*). But there may also be the ultimate downer: someone runs a similar trial and doesn't replicate your results. This has happened, for example, in the case of physical exercise as a treatment for depression. For good reasons the consensus of opinion in the mental health services is that people suffering from depression can experience some relief by regular physical exercise. There is plenty of research demonstrating this. But there is also recent research that seemingly fails to do so (*see note 3*).

If your aim is to have your treatment made available on the NHS, then you have yet another obstacle to face. Your research may demonstrate that your treatment has beneficial effects, but this doesn't guarantee its uptake by practitioners in the Health Service. This tends to be the fate of many ancillary treatments of the kind we are considering. Suppose a patient wants to know if the local hospital can offer him or her hypnotherapy, acupuncture, yoga, exercise therapy, meditation, or whatever. Whether this is so will depend on there being a doctor, physiotherapist, psychologist etc. at the hospital who has an interest in the treatment being sought. One reply to the patient's question might be, 'We used to have a doctor here who did this treatment but he left about two years ago'. In other words, the treatment does not become routine or *institutionalised*. Also it is often the case that there is a kind of market place for non-routine ancillary treatments, and your treatment has to compete with others for the favourable attention of professionals seeking to widen the range of interventions on offer at their clinics. Psychological therapies for mental health problems are a wonderful example of this.

I should mention one more phenomenon here: when a treatment that has been shown to be effective at the research stage becomes routinely available clinically, the benefits seem less impressive. Hence one should be particularly sceptical about announcements of ‘breakthroughs’ in the treatment of some disease or problem.

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***When a treatment that has been shown to be effective at the research stage becomes routinely available clinically, the benefits seem less impressive.***

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In the face of all this, is there a better way of making available your treatment to those patients who might benefit from it? Try the suck-it-and-see method! Publicise your methods in the media, on the internet, in clinics and GP surgeries, and so on; compile user-friendly information booklets and worksheets; audit your own practice for outcomes (but remember that long-term follow-ups are essential); encourage other practitioners to try out your methods. This is what happens for many treatments that are not *routinely* available in the NHS and there is nothing inherently wrong with it. You must of course be ethical and not make unjustifiable claims (which, quite rightly, will land you in trouble); you must make it clear to prospective customers that they should ensure they are receiving or have received what is recognised as the best available treatment for their problem; and you

should advise, where necessary, that they consult their doctor before availing themselves of the treatment. Yes, there may be risks; for example, I might injure my back doing my stretching exercises. And there are treatments that are positively dangerous, such as severe dietary regimes, that should never be promoted. But let’s not get too hung up on dangers; after all, if you agree to go into hospital for some routine treatment you risk dying from some condition you didn’t have before you were admitted, and wouldn’t have had had you stayed at home.

It is a healthy society that can tolerate a diverse range of ideas and practices, even irrational and absurd ones and even those concerning the understanding of illness and its treatment. Those advocating and prescribing treatment methods should be held to account and public money should only be allocated to those treatments that have a rational basis, that don’t contradict existing scientific knowledge, and whose application is justified by the accumulated evidence of clinical practice and, where possible and feasible, controlled research. But let us acknowledge the place for the suck-it-and-see approach to treatment and not always insist that every treatment available to the population should be supported by well-conducted clinical trials.

#### **Notes**

1. It is not mere flippancy to say that if you want to validate any treatment of your devising, choose a condition such as back pain; if you are convincing with

your patients, you’ve a good chance of demonstrating an improvement over ‘treatment as usual’ and then you can market your treatment as ‘evidence-based’!

2. As I have been talking about back pain, it is apposite to note that a recent controlled trial of antibiotics for this condition, much heralded in the media, has now been subject to a much more restrained analysis – see the snippet on ‘Back pain’ in this issue’s ‘Of Interest’.

3. See Chalder, M. et al. (2012) Facilitated physical activity as a treatment for depressed adults: randomised controlled trial. *British Medical Journal*, **344**, e2758. At:

<http://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.e2758>.

This study has itself been treated with some scepticism, as a Google search will testify; see for example ‘Exercise doesn’t help depression? Let’s take a real look at that study’ by *The Scicurious Brain* at:

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/scicurious-brain/2012/06/11/exercise-doesnt-help-depression-lets-take-a-real-look-at-that-study/>.

Concerning exercise for depression, our best advice to depressed people is: ‘Give it your best shot; it can’t do any harm if you do it sensibly, it will probably make you healthier, and it could even lift your mood’. End of story - and please, no more clinical trials!

## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

### Regional languages and EU conspiracies

The various books in the 'Disinformation' series (produced by Richard Metzger) adduce a range of conspiracies which have allegedly subverted wholesome institutions around the world. In one of these books, Lindsay Jenkins asserts that the European Union's support for regionalism is part of a program aimed at destroying the nation states which came together to set up the EU and replacing them with a super-state. This policy includes the fostering of regional languages, such as Breton in the north-west of France and Welsh in Wales – often by way of a reversal of earlier, arguably 'discriminatory' policies which exclusively favoured major national languages such as French and English (especially their standard varieties). Jenkins holds that the increased use of 'minor' languages in education and the widening of the right to use them in other public domains are aimed in large part at the fragmentation and eventually the collapse of the countries in question.

In his 2010 book *Voodoo Histories*, conspiracy-theory critic David Aaronovitch summarises this view with the sentence 'How Welsh Destroyed the United Kingdom'. While some forces associated with the EU do indeed appear hostile to traditional nation states, these stronger claims – as Aaronovitch points out – might appear exaggerated, to say the least. And writers such as Jenkins – even if their conspiracy theories should prove to be partly valid – do not seem to take adequately into account the positive benefits (psycho-sociolinguistic, etc.) arising from the recognition and 'validation' of hitherto discouraged languages.

According to Jenkins and others, these linguistic policies also have other unwelcome consequences (not necessarily intended by the Brussels bureaucrats). It is held, for example, that

children who are taught in these languages, which are used and understood only in small non-metropolitan regions, are in consequence placed at a disadvantage in the wider world. However, most linguists hold that bilingualism in fact **improves** a person's facility for acquiring further languages; and almost all Breton- and Welsh-speaking children are nowadays bilingual by the time they are exposed to other languages.

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*Most linguists hold that bilingualism in fact improves a person's facility for acquiring further languages.*

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This is not to say that there are no genuine issues here. It **could** be held, for instance, that time spent on Welsh in Welsh schools – especially by non-native-speaking children in areas such as the Maelor ('Detached Flint', east of Wrexham) where Welsh is very little used – would be better spent, in the context of already rather full curricula, on (say) German or Mandarin.

### Does being multilingual (or knowing some linguistics) make you a better philosopher? (Part 1)

The 'analytical' component of the 'Anglo-American' tradition of mainstream philosophy makes heavy use of the analysis of language in attempts to resolve philosophical conundrums and problems ('ordinary language philosophy'). Much of this work, notably 'Speech Act Theory', is of great interest. However, too few scholars know both philosophy and linguistics (especially the linguistics of 'exotic' languages) well enough to enable them to proceed in this way with real authority; hence the possibility of skeptical attention.

The principal issue here involves the dangers inherent in seeing a problem as

**philosophical** in character when in fact it is essentially **linguistic**, or basing a **philosophical** analysis or argument upon any one **linguistic** formulation of a concept or a proposition in a given language – as opposed to other, linguistically equally valid formulations which may be treated (perhaps in an arbitrary manner) as philosophically less helpful or even as misleading. My main claim here is that if one knows more languages one is better able to spot 'puzzles' which are language-specific (especially in one's own first language) and thus linguistic in character, and will tend not to be distracted into imagining that such issues are instead philosophical in character or can be solved or explained in philosophical terms (for instance by means of the philosophical analysis of the relevant usage in a specific language or a cluster of closely-related languages).

This issue does not necessarily involve the question of how such formulations might be **analysed** by a linguist – although in **some** cases issues regarding linguistic analysis may themselves be important in this context.

Some would argue that one can never expect to find **definitive** solutions to strictly philosophical (non-empirical) problems; but in this context we are concerned not with anything quite as grand as solving philosophical problems but rather with identifying the proper domains of problems and seeking non-philosophical explanations of phenomena now identified as non-philosophical.

Most of the specific points at issue here involve semantics (linguistic meaning), which is the main area of overlap between philosophy and linguistics – but grammar (especially that of a philosopher's first language) **can** be distracting in the philosophical domain, particularly where it relates (often in a complex way) to logical formulations or is implicated with



meaning in other ways. I will provide some examples of this later.

It is true that philosophers of language – including some, such as John Searle, with linguistic training – have ‘problematized’ language itself, and thus have discouraged the treatment of linguistic forms and their meanings as transparent; but some analytical work continues to rely heavily on such methods.

Undergraduate or amateur philosophers are probably especially prone to such errors, but even professional philosophers may at times be at fault in this way. For example, Gilbert Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind*, treats some metaphorical ways of talking about human minds in English as helpful and even as authoritative, and other ways as embodying misleading ‘category errors’ (generating the alleged fallacy of the ‘ghost in the machine’, etc.) – but he does not adequately justify this preference.

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**The better one’s grasp of philosophical Greek and the less one has to rely on translations, the better equipped one is to follow Plato’s discussion of such concepts.**

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Many philosophical arguments of this kind, including Ryle’s, are based upon linguistic formulations in only one language, often the philosopher’s own first language or English, the dominant language of modern scholarship. Or, at best, they are based upon linguistic formulations taken from members of a group of closely-related languages (for instance, English, German and even French) where the formulations usual in one language often translate fairly directly into those usual in another. And this is potentially even more damaging. Attention to languages with rather different structures and idioms might well lead a philosopher to doubt the universal validity of such arguments. English, and indeed Indo-European

languages generally, while especially well known in the modern West, have no special status in this respect. It might thus be argued that knowledge of a wider range of languages than is usual (even if not to the level of fluency or easy reading) has the potential to make one a better student of philosophy. (Actually, I myself regarded this position as plausibly true until I was accused by monoglot philosophy students of exaggerating the importance of linguistic forms in this context and was thus forced to defend it.)

One relatively straightforward aspect of this issue involves the fact that many particular concepts of specifically philosophical interest, and contrasts between them, do not translate comfortably between languages. A well-known example is the concept expressed by the Ancient Greek word *arete*, which is salient in the argumentation in (for instance) Plato’s *Republic*. The *arete* of a tool such as a knife is its function or purpose (in this case cutting etc.), but uncreated objects, animals and human beings are also readily described in philosophical Greek as having an *arete*. The better one’s grasp of philosophical Greek and the less one has to rely on translations, the better equipped one is to follow Plato’s discussion of such concepts.

Naturally, this does not imply that one will necessarily **agree** with Plato’s treatment of *arete* and other concepts. The notion of *arete* arguably encourages a teleological view of human beings and the entire world, which many modern philosophers (especially those who have no religion) would resist and which is not encouraged by the relevant vocabulary items in, say, the English-speaking world, where (on most views) only tools have functions or purposes. (Of course, **some** people today do hold such views; I once read a letter to a newspaper editor claiming that the purpose of women is to bear and rear children and that those women who do not do this are selfishly ignoring their purpose.)

More on this theme next time!

### **More puns, quirks and quibbles**

In Chinese (all types), puns are frequent because of very extensive homophony (even allowing for tonal differences, there are relatively few possible word-forms). For example, ‘die’ and the number ‘four’ are both *sei* in Cantonese, and the high level of superstition which prevails in Chinese communities leads to the avoidance (at almost all costs) of sets of four items: a Hong Kong power station was once given a fifth, redundant chimney, at vast expense (shades of feng shui!). And the words for ‘chicken’ and ‘prostitute’ are both *gai*; punning on these words is especially common. One of my Hong Kong students went on holiday to Bangkok and on her return told me (in English) that ‘chicken business’ was very well developed there!

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**‘Die’ and the number ‘four’ are both *sei* in Cantonese, and the high level of superstition which prevails in Chinese communities leads to the avoidance (at almost all costs) of sets of four items.**

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Sometimes words or word-parts are misinterpreted as equivalent to better-known homophonous words and spelled accordingly. Another account of a holiday, written as a British secondary school essay, referred to the author’s recent trip to *Norfuck*!

Grammatical ambiguity can also generate much amusement. One example involved my own misreading of a caption in a folk-museum in South Australia. I read the expression *this boring machine...* as a surprising slur on a rather interesting exhibit, only to realise after a few seconds that the **function** of the machine was in question! In speech, different stress patterns would disambiguate. Try saying the phrase to yourself with one meaning and then with the other. Another such example involves the ambiguity – in

writing only – of expressions such as *silver box*.

The English grammatical construction *have* + object noun phrase + passive participle, as in *I had a book stolen*, is systematically ambiguous (‘Someone stole one of my books’ versus ‘I arranged for a book to be stolen’). (Note a rarer, third meaning which is possible in some cases, as in *I had a room booked*.) And, where less perspicuous word orders are grammatically required (as in a question), the past tense form of this construction (as used in these examples here) can also be mistaken for the simpler ‘pluperfect’ construction as in *I had stolen a book*. An entry in a sociolinguistic questionnaire, *If you were on the council, what would you have done in the city?*, was interpreted by some informants (who unexpectedly construed *were* as equivalent to *had been*) as asking about what they themselves would have done (complex pluperfect) in past years if they had then been on the council. It was in fact intended to mean ‘What would you arrange to be done if you were on the council at present or in the future?’.

The potential for confusion here is greater when reading 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century writing, when object noun phrases in these constructions were more frequently placed in clause-final position. Thus, one instance of *Grandma had constructed a summer-house* in such a work means, in context, ‘Grandma had a summer-house constructed’ (‘Grandma arranged for a summer-house to be constructed’), **not** (as might be imagined) ‘Grandma herself had [previously] constructed a summer-house’ (pluperfect). Confusion is also more likely in varieties such as Irish English, where expressions such as *He had some drink taken* (‘He had been drinking [alcohol]’) are common.

Individual words which are now altogether homonymous sometimes have **opposite** meanings. One such case involves *let* (‘allow’, ‘let go’) and *let*

(‘hinder’, as in let-calls in tennis and squash and in *without let or hindrance* on passports). These words were once spelled and pronounced differently but (like *ear* and *ear* as discussed previously) became homonyms; thus *Let him*, shouted as someone fled, could now mean either ‘Stop him’ or ‘Let him go’. Naturally, the less common of the two words fell out of everyday use and acquired much more specialised senses. A similar case, where **both** words have now become infrequent, involves *cleave* as in Biblical *a man shall cleave to his wife* and *cleave* as in *meat-cleaver*.

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***Some pairs of expressions which look as if they should have opposite meanings are in fact synonymous or nearly so: consider it’s down to me and it’s up to me***

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In contrast, some pairs of expressions which look as if they should have opposite meanings are in fact synonymous or nearly so: consider *it’s down to me* and *it’s up to me*.

Dialect differences can have interesting consequences. If an American tutor says that a student’s essay is *quite good*, she is not ‘damning with faint praise’ like British tutors using the expression, but rather means something close to ‘very good’. More dramatically, a terrorist once sent a letter-bomb and (under separate cover!) a message saying *You know what we want; we will continue while we get it*. A detective found this use of *while* (‘until’) odd and consulted a dialectologist, who rapidly narrowed down the origin of the writer to specific areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire; an arrest quickly followed. (In the same region, signs at railway crossings reading **WAIT WHILE RED LIGHT SHOWS** generated several near-accidents!)

Non-native varieties can be even more surprisingly diverse. Hong Kong

speakers of English use *later* as in *two weeks later* to mean ‘from now’; one of them once went to the airport a day too early to meet an American colleague who had said *I’m leaving tomorrow and coming back on Flight X five days later*. And electrical instruction manuals drafted by Southeast Asian students require careful proof-reading in case the terms *open* and *closed*, of circuits, have been used with interchanged meanings; in local usage, an open circuit – seen as a conduit – is one which **permits** the flow of current!

Another example of zeugma/syllepsis involves a line from a song by the band XTC: [*I*] *never took a paper or a learned degree*. Construed with *a paper*, *took* means ‘sat’ [an exam]; with *a learned degree*, it means ‘obtained’, ‘earned’. The common context (academia) arguably lessens the force of the anomaly.

#### **Disembodied voices**

I once ran an English Language assignment at a university in Hong Kong, in which students were asked to read out words written in the International Phonetic Association Alphabet. Their performances were taped and later I sat down in my office to mark them. The tape-recorder was new and ran very quietly; it was also small and unobtrusive. One student had struggled with one particular word and there was a long gap on her tape. While I waited, a colleague entered and failed to notice the machine. As she was about to talk to me, my student’s voice, apparently speaking out of thin air, proclaimed: ‘Apocalypse!’ My colleague nearly jumped out of her skin! (The specific word in question quite probably added to her alarm!)

## ARTICLES

### MODIFYING ENGLISH: BEYOND SPELLING REFORM

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**Mark Newbrook**

*Mark Newbrook is currently a research associate affiliated with Sheffield University. His main areas of research interest are dialectology, controversies in historical linguistics and skeptical linguistics generally.*

Most readers will have seen my piece about spelling reform in the 2012 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*. As I remarked in that article, there have also been proposals for more radical reform of English, extending to linguistic 'levels' beyond spelling and phonology. Once again, many of the authors in question here know too little linguistics to deal adequately with the task which they set themselves, and skeptical comment is often called for.

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***Considerable effort is involved in speaking a different dialect of one's native language, or even a closely related language.***

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These more radical proposals for English, such as that offered by the American thinker Pawl Douer, typically involve reform of the grammar and/or vocabulary of the language, thereby creating entire new varieties of English, or even (arguably) new English-like languages. (Indeed, some such proposals resemble in some respects some of the even more radical proposals for entirely novel invented languages, as discussed by me a while ago in 'Language On The Fringe'.) Douer's own proposal is titled Interglish or 'Improved' English, and involves an English-like artificial language with an essentially phonemic

spelling system (assuming a General American accent; see below) and a simplified and regularised grammar; it would be learned as a universal 'auxiliary' second language (as is intended for Esperanto and such) and might eventually replace English altogether.

Native speakers of English would of course have an advantage in learning Interglish; but this might be a price which would have to be paid if speakers of the world's current dominant language were to be persuaded to accept such an 'auxiliary'. On the other hand, native speakers might resent what they could perceive as a 'bastardised' form of English – rather as some English-based and other creole languages, which are also simpler than 'normal' languages, are denigrated by (often racist) non-specialist critics and even by some of their users. Furthermore, it is difficult to maintain distinctions between language varieties which are so similar. Considerable effort is involved in speaking a different dialect of one's native language, or even a closely related language; thus, Italians learning Spanish tend to 'lapse' into Italian, and *vice versa*. English-speakers might well tend to lapse into English when using Interglish.

Douer also created further difficulties for himself by incorporating largely phonemic spelling and therefore

having to select a specific English accent for Interglish (on this issue, see my recent *Skeptical Intelligencer* piece): inevitably, he selected General American. He was therefore unable to advise English-speakers with other accents to pronounce Interglish words as they would if they were speaking English.

Douer worked on Interglish and corresponded with me on the subject until shortly before his tragically early death, which he knew was approaching; at times he felt that his work would never be taken as seriously as he thought it deserved and had been useless, but (as I reassured him) I was more than happy to save his material for posterity's future consideration. However, English/English-like varieties such as Interglish would seem **viable**, if at all, **only** as second dialects to be used by native speakers for inter-group communication, or (more plausibly) as 'easier' second-language varieties of English to be used together by non-native speakers with no other common language.

Another proposal for an English-based auxiliary, 'Unish', has emerged from a Korean source (like much unusual linguistic material). It has a vocabulary drawn from a range of languages; it is not always clear why a given word is taken from the language in question. The **grammar**, on the other hand, is closely based on that of

English. There are many salient Interglish-like simplifications; but in some respects (for example, the past tense used in ‘remote conditionals’, as in *If it rained we’d go home*) even the more obviously arbitrary features of English are retained. This rather runs counter to a major justification offered for the proposal: the need to counter the overwhelming advantage of native speakers of English in the contemporary world. Furthermore, some of the problems which would handicap Interglish would apply here as well. In addition, Unish has a very small repertoire of subordinate clauses; this leads to ‘parataxis’, ‘jerky’ sequences of short sentences.

Globish is a privatised, ‘commercially driven’ English-derived world language with a small vocabulary (1,500 words) and a reduced phonology, invented by Jean-Paul Nerrière. It is intended to represent the common ground that non-native English speakers adopt in business contexts. There are obvious parallels between Globish and Interglish, and also parallels with the older Basic English, an English-based language created by linguist and philosopher Charles Kay Ogden for similar purposes. Basic English is a ‘simplified subset of English’; it flourished in the period following World War II. A somewhat different version, Essential World English, was offered by Lancelot Hogben, also the inventor of the

intriguing auxiliary language Interglossa.

The General Semantics belief-system has at its core the notion that thought and behaviour are very closely determined by linguistic usage, and that crucial modifications to habitual usage can lead to radical modification to thought and behaviour (preferably for the better). This is well exemplified by the GS variety of English, ‘E-Prime’, which eschews the verb *be* as far as possible; thus, it allegedly eliminates fundamental (‘Aristotelian’) errors and misconceptions in logic as expressed in languages like English which make heavy use of such a verb, and more generally contributes to the wholesomeness and effectiveness of thinking. (It is not at all clear that this is really the case!)

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***This is well exemplified by the GS variety of English, ‘E-Prime’, which eschews the verb *be* as far as possible.***

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The actor Kenneth Campbell offers another, roughly similar proposal for a worldwide ‘auxiliary’ second language, based on Bislama and Neo-Melanesian (also known as Tok Pisin), both English-based creole languages which are the main *lingua francas* and increasingly the main official languages of Vanuatu and Papua-New Guinea

respectively. This project is called Wol Wontok (‘world common language’ in Wol Wontok). Given their largely English-derived vocabulary, straightforward phonology and simple, highly systematic grammars, such creoles would not be an altogether unwelcome option in this capacity. However, some of the sociolinguistic objections to Interglish would again apply in this case. Campbell’s enthusiasm is not wholly misdirected but is perhaps exaggerated.

More modest and less obviously non-mainstream proposals for the reform of aspects of language other than spelling include the development (partly by overtly feminist thinkers) of noun and pronoun systems in which sex/gender is not marked; the most obvious example of this involves the now common use in English of *they* with singular reference in preference to *he* and *she*, as in *If anyone doesn’t like it here they can leave*. Sex-neutral singular third-person pronouns already exist in some natural languages (notably Finnish and Hungarian); and even in English first- and second-person pronouns such as *I*, *we* and *you* are sex-neutral.

References to these works will be provided on request. Readers can contact the author at:

[morcusporcus@btinternet.com](mailto:morcusporcus@btinternet.com).

## BOOK REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

**Left Behind.** A series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Tyndale House

### Peter Lucey

Not sure if this short review is appropriate for a Skeptic's publication! Anyway you may or may not know of the 'Left Behind' series of books. Wikipedia summarises it as: 'Left Behind is a series of 16 best-selling novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, dealing with Christian dispensationalist End Times: a pretribulation, premillennial, Christian eschatological viewpoint of the end of the world'.

This series has sold a gazillion\* copies, mainly in Xtian fundi-parts of the English speaking world. They are best described as Xtian sci-fi detailing the adventures of various people left on the earth after the Rapture. The series got a rather po-faced comment by Christopher Hitchens; perhaps he took them too seriously.

But anyway, I hear you cry, 'What am I doing reading a Fundi text?' Well, on holiday in Barbados the hotel 'library' - where I, among many others of course, leave their finished beach-reading for following guests - had two of the series: the first one 'Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days'; and number 9 (I think), entitled 'Apollyon'.

Nothing ventured, I tried the first (there was a biro'd phone number of the

nearest church on the flyleaf BTW. Many lampposts on Barbados have flyers warning of the Apocalypse, and the latest preacher to save y'all.)

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***I have to say LB #1 was fun, if you have a sense of humour; and well written for an airport novel. Well-paced, too.***

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I have to say LB #1 was fun, if you have a sense of humour; and well written for an airport novel. Well-paced, too: in the first chapter, our fallen hero, a pilot called 'Rayford Steele' - a really 'OK' name for this sort of book - is flying a Jumbo from Chicago to the UK overnight. He's fed up with this Xtian-fundi wife, and contemplating a quick (adulterous!) fling with a stewardess on the UK lay-over. When stretching his legs on the plane, the same chick grabs him, terrified:

'Captain, the passengers have disappeared!' Indeed, many have just gone, their clothes resting neatly on the seats! Yes, it's the Rapture and the good (15% or so of the adults, I think, most of the children and, natch, all the unborn

fetuses) have been removed to Paradise by JC.

The adventure continues when they turn back to O'Hare, the chaos in the US, and the gradual realisation that they must Repent and Believe to combat the AntiChrist who is emerging from the United Nations...

As good as any Tom Clancy and, as SciFi stays, true to its concept.

Alas #9 'Apollyon: The Destroyer Is Unleashed' is unreadable, a less poetic trawl through Revelations with much lip-smacking suffering for the damned. I can't be bothered to try any of others; I think they're all like that.

So of course I don't recommend you buy LB #1: but if you see it remaindered, or a cheap second-hand purchase, it's worth a shot and you can leave it on the coffee table to spook your skeptic friends!

\*65 million, I think.

## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

**A**SKE 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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

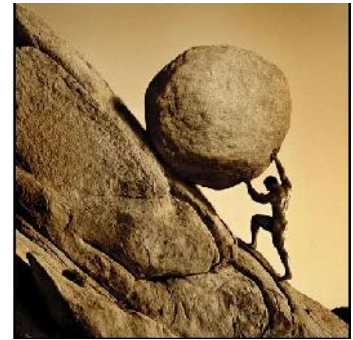
Online registration is now up and running at <http://euroscepticscon.org/>.

### The 16th European Skeptics Congress

This will take place in London in 2015 and will be hosted by ASKE. It is hoped that 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

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

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

'Our annual lecture by Cory Doctorow, "We get to choose: how to demand an Internet that sets us free" was lively, inspiring and contained so much information that many of us are keen to hear it again and share it with others. It's now available from the Guardian Science podcast here:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/audio/2013/may/20/podcast-science-weekly-senseaboutscience-doctorow>.'

Sense About Science's 'Making Sense of Uncertainty' guide was launched on 27.6.13. See:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/331/making-sense-of-uncertainty-guide-is-launched>

Tracey Brown wrote in the Guardian about Nick Clegg's response to being asked whether he would feed GM food to his children and on the wider question of asking politicians about whether they vaccinate their children or use mobile phones to assess risk. At:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2013/jun/28/nick-clegg-kids-gm-food>

#### Scientists on BBC's 'Question Time'

'Since the last general election 13 comedians have appeared on Question Time, and Russell Brand will make it 14 next week. The ubiquitous Nigel Farage, leader of a protest party with zero MPs and a manifesto comprised entirely of bits of old Jeremy Clarkson jokes, has been on 8 times. The 'dragons' of Dragons' Den have appeared 4 times

between them. Scientists have appeared just twice. Katie Hopkins from The Apprentice has been on as many times as all scientists or science writers put together.' At:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/the-lay-scientist/2013/jun/14/bbc-question-time>

#### BBC Radio 4's 'More or Less'

This is a 'must listen to' programme for all skeptics. Economist Tim Halford investigates topical statistics and other numerical claims that are used by politicians and journalists to justify their policies and ideas and asks 'Are the numbers reliable?' and 'Do they justify the claims based upon them?', all too frequently the answers being No! Amongst items in the most recent series that caught my ear have been the supposed crime wave by Romanian immigrants (there isn't one); the misuse by Educational Secretary Michael Gove

of the results of PR surveys (with an excellent contribution by Michael Marshall of the Merseyside Skeptics and QED fame); and the number of descendants of Richard III (or strictly speaking, his parents) – between 1 and 17 million and possibly more. The last-mentioned is topical in view of the petition to the High Court by 15 alleged descendants 15 concerning where he should be buried.

Podcasts may be downloaded free at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/moreorless>

Most poignantly, the programme examines the truth of the much quoted claim that more war veteran soldiers die by suicide than on active service. This topic is also addressed later in this section with respect to veterans of the Falklands War.

#### **Full Fact**

<http://fullfact.org/>

‘Full Fact is an independent fact-checking organisation. We make it easier to see the facts and context behind the claims made by the key players in British political debate and press those who make misleading claims to correct the record. We have already successfully pressed for inaccurate claims to be corrected in Parliament and the national press, and our work has been cited by Government Ministers, Opposition frontbenchers and influential journalists and commentators.’

#### **National Secular Society**

To see the latest edition of the National Secular Society’s newsletter click on the link below.

<http://www.secularism.org.uk/newsletters/newline-14-june-2013.html>

#### **Mathematics celebrated**

‘In 1959 C P Snow delivered a celebrated lecture in which he decried the man-made gulf between the arts and the sciences. Yet there is one subject that already spans the divide and is unjustly neglected — mathematics.’

From ‘The third culture: The power and glory of mathematics’ by Ian Stewart, *New Scientist*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013. At:

<http://www.newstatesman.com/sci-tech/2013/04/third-culture-power-and-glory-mathematics>

### **SCIENTIFIC TOPICS**

#### **GM Crops**

Britain is urging the European Union to ease restrictions on genetically modified crops and other cutting-edge branches of science before the continent becomes a ‘museum of 20th century technology’, the Science Minister David Willets has said’. See (by subscription): <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/science/article3786829.ece>

#### **‘Bomb-detectors’ that were no better than dowsing rods**

A millionaire businessman who sold fake bomb detectors to countries including Iraq and Georgia, knowing they did not work, has been convicted of fraud. James McCormick of Langport, Somerset is said to have made £50m from sales and sold more than 6,000 in Iraq. Astonishing claims were made for the device’s performance in the absence of any evidence, even for their original intended purpose – to locate lost golf balls. A cruel lesson in the pitfalls of ignoring science. See:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22266051>  
and

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ADE\\_651](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ADE_651)

According to the latter, McCormick told the BBC in 2010 that ‘the theory behind dowsing and the theory behind how we actually detect explosives is (*sic*) very similar’.

### **MEDICINE (GENERAL)**

#### **The Nightingale Collaboration**

See the website below for recent activity including: ‘Yet another adjudication against the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine upheld by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). As previously reported, we won an ASA adjudication against the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine (RLHIM) for claims they were making in their leaflet on hypnosis and an informally resolved case over their marigold therapy leaflet. We have now

had another complaint upheld — this time against claims in their leaflets on acupuncture’ (see below).

If you do not already do so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter? At:

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

#### **Acupuncture**

The Nightingale Collaboration has successfully challenged the contents of two leaflets promoting acupuncture with bogus claims by the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine (RLHIM). The ASA on 12.6.13 ruled that ‘the advertisements must not appear again in their current form’. It informed the RLHIM it should not state or imply that acupuncture was efficacious for conditions for which they did not hold adequate evidence. At:

[http://asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2013/6/University-College-London-Hospitals/SHP\\_ADJ\\_166633.aspx](http://asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2013/6/University-College-London-Hospitals/SHP_ADJ_166633.aspx)

#### **Society of Homeopaths**

‘Following the online remit extension in 2011 the ASA received a large number of complaints about claims relating to homeopathy that appeared on a number of websites. The ASA therefore made the decision to conduct an investigation to determine the acceptability of the type of claims being made for homeopathy. We understood that, as an industry body, the Society of Homeopaths had access to the relevant evidence, and we therefore considered the case was suitable to establish our lead position on claims for homeopathy.’ ..... ‘Three issues were investigated, all of which were Upheld.’ See:

[http://www.asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2013/7/Society-of-Homeopaths/SHP\\_ADJ\\_157043.aspx](http://www.asa.org.uk/Rulings/Adjudications/2013/7/Society-of-Homeopaths/SHP_ADJ_157043.aspx)

#### **No more homeopathy funding by NHS Lothian**

Funding for homeopathic clinics is to be axed by a major Scottish health board. NHS Lothian has announced that, following a major consultation process, it is to ‘move away’ from providing homeopathic services – including

sending patients to Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital. The decision follows a survey, conducted for the health board, which found 72% of respondents did not want NHS Lothian to pay for this controversial form of care. See:

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/health/health-board-plans-to-axe-funding-for-homeopathy-treatment.21443524>

### **Veterinary homeopathy**

'The MP who wants homeopathy for sheep'. No guessing who! See:

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/matthew-wholehouse/100225430/the-mp-who-wants-homeopathy-for-sheep/>

Meanwhile: 'Thousands of pets are put at risk by pet insurance companies who encourage owners to believe that homeopathic treatments are as effective as conventional vaccinations, leading vets have warned'. At:

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/money/insurance/article3817991.ece>

### **MMR jab**

The recent epidemic of measles in South Wales has highlighted how important it is that parents ensure that their children receive the MMR jab and that they ignore the false propaganda that it causes autism, based on the discredited work of Andrew Wakefield. Incomprehensibly, the UK newspaper the *Independent* carried a major story featuring a statement by Wakefield, blaming the government for the measles outbreak. See:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/full-statement-by-mmr-scare-doctor-andrew-wakefield-the-government-has-tried-to-cover-up-putting-price-before-childrens-health-8570596.html>

The *Independent* has been lambasted in many quarters for its irresponsibility in carrying this statement. See for example:

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/bad\\_astronomy/2013/04/14/vaccine\\_and\\_autism\\_uk\\_measles\\_outbreaks\\_and\\_andrew\\_wakefield.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/bad_astronomy/2013/04/14/vaccine_and_autism_uk_measles_outbreaks_and_andrew_wakefield.html)

Will the MMR jab always be tarred with the autism brush, causing avoidable illness in children and even the occasional long-term disability and death? I fear so. When the Swansea measles outbreak was at his height, a Radio 4 reporter interviewed a mother from the area who, while urging parents to have their children vaccinated, expressed the opinion that her own child had developed autism due because of the MMR jab!

### **Healthy food claims**

Forwarded by Chris French, from Christopher Thresher-Andrews MSc MBPsS AMRS Visiting Tutor & PhD Student:

'I've been recently volunteering as a research assistant for the campaign group Sense About Science's junior wing - the Young Voices of Science. We have recently launched a campaign that calls for supermarkets to put evidence at the heart of their policies. We have been asking supermarkets for evidence behind claims and policies on products that are claimed to be free from GM, parabens and MSG.

'The supermarkets were asked to give reasons for advertising products as "free from" these substances. Without exception, those supermarkets which responded did not provide evidence of health effects. Instead they blamed customer concerns. In response, we have written an open letter to ten supermarket CEOs, calling on supermarkets to stop misleading customers about health risks.

'It's started to pick up some press in the guardian blogs which I have attached below, but it would be great if you feel happy to, to share this with your mailing list? .... It is an important campaign regarding the use of bad misleading science that can contribute to unfounded public health fears.

'Many thanks for any help you can give in raising awareness!' See:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/afe-negative-claims.html>

and

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2013/may/09/supermarkets-unfounded-fears-food-health>

### **Mobile phones**

Next time people tell you unwarranted scare stories about mobile phones and cancer remind them of this: 'A report from Axa Insurance suggests that children are being killed or injured in sharply increasing numbers because they are looking at their mobile phones while walking to school'. At:

<http://www.driving.co.uk/news/news-mobile-phones-linked-to-rise-in-child-road-deaths/12303>

### **Back pain**

There was much interest in the media in May about two research papers from the University of Southern Denmark, published in the *European Spine Journal*, announcing that chronic lower-back pain (defined as lasting more than three months) may be caused by a bacterial infection and that antibiotics are an effective treatment. See:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/may/12/back-pain-ask-doctor-antibiotics>

However, a paper by Margaret McCartney in the May 14<sup>th</sup> issue of the *British Medical Journal* entitled 'Antibiotics for back pain: hope or hype?' offers a more guarded opinion. 'The media went crazy for a recent research paper that showed some benefit in long term antibiotic use for some patients with back pain. But was this science or sensationalism, is talk of a Nobel prize premature, and what of the author's potential conflicts of interest?' At:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.f3122>

## **PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOLOGY**

### **DSM-5**

The new version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association has now been published amidst much controversy and criticism. 'Critics say the rulebook turns normal behaviour, like grief or childhood temper tantrums, into mental illness.' See:



<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-22570857>

and

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/dsm-5>

Also see *New Scientist* article by Allen Frances: 'One manual shouldn't dictate US mental health research'.

'In my opinion, the DSM-5 process has been secretive, closed and sloppy – with confidentiality restraints, constantly missed deadlines, botched field testing, the cancellation of an important quality control step, and a rush to publication. A petition for independent scientific review endorsed by 56 mental health organisations was ignored. There is no reason to believe that DSM-5 is safe or scientifically sound.' At:

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn23490-one-manual-sh>

### **Suicide rate of Falklands War veterans**

One suicide is a one too many but there appears to be no evidence to support the much-quoted claim that more Falklands soldiers have taken their own lives since the conflict than were killed during it. In fact people who served in the Falklands are actually about a third less likely to take their own lives than expected. Some relevant statistics have recently been released by Defence Analytical Services and Advice. See:

<http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&thiscontent=1440&date=2013-05-14&pubType=0&PublishTime=08:30:00&from=home&tabOption=1>

and

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/falklands-official-statistics-released>

For further information on this topic go to the reference to BBC Radio 4's 'More or Less' in this section.

### **Elizabeth Loftus on memory**

From Chris French:

'For those of you who could not make it to Prof Elizabeth Loftus's excellent talk for the APRU at Goldsmiths on 20 March, you can enjoy an audio-recording of it (with pictures, including slides) here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-K0SjZqoMQ>

'Also, you can listen to an interview with Prof Loftus here:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/podcasts/>

'A version of this interview will be published in a future issue of *The Skeptic* magazine.'

### **The claims for neuroscience**

'Increasing claims for neuroscience – that it can locate jealousy or Muslim fundamentalism – are ludicrous' says Professor Raymond Tallis, former physician and clinical scientist in an article entitled 'Think brain scans can reveal our innermost thoughts? Think again'. At:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jun/02/brain-scans-innermost-thoughts>

### **The ideomotor effect**

See article by Chris French at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2013/apr/27/ouija-boards-dowsing-rods-bomb-detectors#start-of-comments>

### **Bogus psychometric test?**

It has been reported that 'jobseekers are being made to complete bogus psychometric tests by the Department for Work and Pensions – and told that in some cases they risk losing their benefits if they do not complete the meaningless online questionnaire. The test called My Strengths, devised by Downing Street's Behavioural Insights or "Nudge" unit, has been exposed by bloggers as a sham with results having no relation to the answers given'.

<http://ilegal.org.uk/thread/7563/love-learning-behavioural-control-unemployed?scrollTo=18999&page=1>

and

<http://ilegal.org.uk/thread/7541/dwp-behavioural-control-presentation>

and

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/apr/30/jobseekers-bogus-psychometric-tests-unemployed>

## **RELIGION**

### **Mother Teresa**

'A new exposé of Mother Teresa shows that she—and the Vatican—were even worse than we thought'. At:

<http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2013/03/05/a-new-expose-on-mother-teresa-shows-that-she-and-the-vatican-were-even-worse-than-we-thought/>

## **RESEARCH**

### **Enlightening or mystical experiences**

From Chris French:

'Alice Herron at the University of Surrey is carrying out an investigation into the spontaneous, transformative, enlightening and/or mystical-type experiences of atheists. If you are an atheist and have had one or more of these experiences and would be willing to participate in this study, please contact her directly at

[a.herron@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:a.herron@surrey.ac.uk).

'The research has received a favourable ethical review from the University of Surrey.'

### **Intentional and unintentional movements**

'If you have 15 minutes to spare, why not take part in a brief psychological experiment investigating the ability to discern subtle differences between intentional and unintentional movements? You'll just have to watch some very short (4-second) videos and tell us some of your opinions about the world, and you'll be in with a chance of winning a £15 Amazon voucher.' At:

<http://gold.psychresearch.co.uk/index.php/survey/index/sid/847331/newtest/Y/lan/en>

### **Cellular memory**

From Chris French (abridged):

Ellie Austin is writing an article on cellular memory (as it relates to organ transplants) as her project for an MA course in Magazine Journalism. In case you don't know what cellular memory is, here is the definition from Wikipedia:

*A variation of body memory, the pseudoscientific hypothesis that*

memories can be stored in individual cells.

You can find more on the topic here: <http://skeptdic.com/cellular.html>

This concerns the idea that receiving an organ donation can result in a person taking on characteristics and memories from the donor. Can you help? Do you believe in cellular memory or know someone who does who would be willing to be interviewed? If so, please contact Ellie directly at: [ellieaustin97@hotmail.com](mailto:ellieaustin97@hotmail.com).

### **Magic**

Forwarded by Chris French from Howard Williams:

[hw301@eecs.qmul.ac.uk](mailto:hw301@eecs.qmul.ac.uk)

I'm conducting an online experiment looking at the role narrative can play in magic tricks and more generally performance, and also how magical effects can be enhanced by studying psychophysical properties of the human perceptual system. The experiment involves watching a short (approx. 1 minute) video hosted by YouTube and providing three simple responses to the video. The video may or may not have sound, so it is important for participants to watch in an environment that allows for listening (headphones are fine). The whole study from start to finish shouldn't last more than five minutes, including time to read instructions etc. It's all completely anonymous. If you would like to take part, the experiment can be found here: <http://webprojects.eecs.qmul.ac.uk/hw301/Isis/>

### **OTHER UNUSUAL CLAIMS**

#### **'Psychic' wrong again**

This is a spin-off story from the astonishing discovery in May that three women - Michelle Knight, Amanda Berry, and Gina DeJesus, who went missing almost a decade earlier had been abducted and held prisoner in a house in Cleveland Ohio. In 2004, celebrity psychic Sylvia Browne spoke with Amanda Berry's mother, Louwanna Miller, on an episode of the Montel Williams show and informed her that her

daughter, who had gone missing the year before, was no longer alive ('She's not alive, honey ... Your daughter's not the kind who wouldn't call.') Following the psychic's words, Ms Miller was reported to be 98 per cent sure that her daughter was dead. Ms Miller died of heart failure two years later, aged only 44.

So what has Ms Browne to say about that now? 'Only God is right all the time'. (*Pass the sick bag - Ed.*)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/07/sylvia-browne-amanda-berry-cleveland>

Also see James Randi's take, with clips from Ms Browne telling Ms Miller that her daughter was dead at:

<http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/jref-news/2126-the-randi-show-sylvia-browne-wrong-again.html>

Randi challenged Ms Browne years ago. She has not responded (see clip).

#### **Alien abduction**

See Chris French's Guardian Science column, on C4's dire 'documentary' Confessions of an Alien Abductee at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2013/jun/18/confessions-alien-abductee-channel-4>

#### **UFO sighting**

'A passenger plane flying over Glasgow came within 90m (300ft) of colliding with an unidentified flying object (UFO) 'bigger than a balloon', an official inquiry has revealed. The pilot and his non-flying colleague saw an object 'loom ahead' and reported the collision risk as 'high', a report by the UK Airprox Board said. Experts were unable to explain the 'blue and yellow' object that passed below the Airbus A320, which was flying at about 3,500ft in December last year.' At:

<http://metro.co.uk/2013/05/01/glasgow-passenger-planes-near-miss-with-ufo-leaves-air-experts-stumped-3709123/>

#### **The Loch Ness Monster**

Is the Loch Ness Monster just a tourist conspiracy created by proprietors of hotels, cafés, tourist shops, etc. to attract visitors? See:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-22125981>

### **CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

#### **Online papers**

Eleven open-access articles on conspiracy theories edited by Viren Swami and Chris French at:

[http://www.frontiersin.org/Personality\\_Science\\_and\\_Individual\\_Differences/researchtopics/The\\_Psychology\\_of\\_Conspiracy\\_T/863](http://www.frontiersin.org/Personality_Science_and_Individual_Differences/researchtopics/The_Psychology_of_Conspiracy_T/863)

or

<http://bit.ly/12S2INr>

#### **Psychology of beliefs**

From Chris French (*not him again - Ed*):

'For those of you with an interest in the psychology of belief in conspiracy theories, you might like to check out a new paper by Rob Brotherton, myself, and Alan Pickering in *Frontiers in Personality Science and Individual Differences* on measuring belief in conspiracies.' At:

<http://bit.ly/Z9UMnZ>

### **FREEDOM**

### **KEEP LIBEL LAWS OUT OF SCIENCE**

#### **Libel Laws**

From Sense About Science:

'The Defamation Bill has now been agreed by Parliament: see

<http://bit.ly/YULd75>

and

<http://bit.ly/ZrCden>

'Pictures from the four-year anniversary celebration of Simon Singh's decision to fight the libel laws are at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/53777693@N04/sets/72157633542940332/with/8757924358/>

'And film of the speakers - campaigners, comedians, scientists - is on our YouTube channel here (including the story of Simon's case in the style of the 1980 'hit' Captain Beaky, by Tracey Brown!):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLM02MdDv9I>.'

## POLITICS

### ‘NHS Health tourism’

Recently an article appeared in the *Spectator* entitled ‘How NHS health tourism is costing us billions: a surgeon’s story’. This can be found at: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8880071/international-health-service/>

The author, J. Meirion Thomas, a Surgical Oncologist, claims that foreigners coming to the UK for medical treatment ‘may be costing the NHS (and therefore the British taxpayer) not millions but billions of pounds every

year’. The evidence presented is only anecdotal. A more considered assessment is provided by Full Fact (see earlier) at:

[http://fullfact.org/factchecks/cost\\_of\\_health\\_tourism\\_to\\_the\\_nhs-28866](http://fullfact.org/factchecks/cost_of_health_tourism_to_the_nhs-28866)

### What Britons don’t know about Britain

‘A new survey has shown that the British public has the wrong idea about many issues including crime, benefit fraud and immigration’. By Jon Danzig: <http://jondanzig.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/what-britons-dont-know-about-britain.html>

## HUMAN ABSURDITY

### Bread and guns

An 8-year-old Maryland boy who was suspended from school for nibbling a pastry snack into the shape of a gun has been given a junior membership in the National Rifle Association. At:

<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/05/30/oukoe-uk-usa-guns-maryland-idUKBRE94T0ZJ20130530>

## 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.

### SKEPTICAMP

<http://skepticamp.co.uk/>

On Saturday August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, London, WC1R 4RL (£5).

‘SkeptiCamps are conferences for participants, run by participants. Anyone can be a speaker – just reserve yourself a slot and prepare a talk! Each speaker at SkeptiCamp will be allocated a twenty minute slot in which to deliver their talk and answer questions. If you would like to present a talk log on to:

<http://skepticamp.co.uk/schedule/>

To see the latest schedule, go to:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AvnjHhYuxmdKdFViMk54UVh0VVVIM1h1ZmlKeTJFNEE#gid=0>

### LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

<http://forteanlondon.blogspot.co.uk/>

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.’

### CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

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

### CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

<http://conwayhall.org.uk/talks-lectures>  
See the website for upcoming events of interest to skeptics.

### EXPLORING THE EXTRAORDINARY

The Fifth Conference of Exploring the Extraordinary is to be held on 22-24 September 2013 at York. Topics include parapsychology, unusual experiences, altered states of consciousness and reincarnation. See:

<http://etenetwork.weebly.com/>

### HEALTHWATCH

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

Open meeting and Annual General Meeting on Thursday 24 October at The Medical Society of London, 11 Chandos Street, Cavendish Square, London W1M 0EB. Reception at 6.30 p.m.; AGM at 7.00 p.m.; Presentation of Annual HealthWatch Award to Dr Fiona Godlee, Editor-in Chief, BMJ at 7.40 p.m. by Nick Ross, HealthWatch President.

The meeting is free. It will be followed by a buffet dinner with wine at 8.45 p.m. (cost £45), booked in advance before 1 October.

## **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](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)

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website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>.