

THE SKEPTICAL *INTELLIGENCER*



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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

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 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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REGULAR FEATURES

FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

I was 10 years old and I think it was Christmas Eve. On the television were two films that had me transfixed. In one of them, Gary Cooper was singlehandedly saving a town from an armed gang bent on taking it over while he, the retired and newly-wed marshal, was off to a new life elsewhere. In the other, Errol Flynn was leading a futile cavalry charge against a Russian artillery battery.

So excited was I by the latter film that I obtained and learned off by heart Lord Tennyson's poem of the same name, and proudly recited it in front of my class at school:

*...Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air,
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd....*

Fast forward to March 2014 and on the front pages of the newspapers once again are the names Crimea, Balaclava, Sebastopol – even Florence Nightingale and – tarrantarra! - The Charge of the Light Brigade. This was the subject of a discussion on BBC's Radio 4 programme 'Today' (8.3.14) and listeners heard from a leading expert on the Crimean War, Professor Andrew Lambert of the War Studies Unit of Kings College, London. But...Oh dear! It seems that much of

what we have come to believe about the charge is wrong.

Many of those who did not muster were wounded, had lost their horses, or had been captured by the Russians, so the fatalities were far fewer.

It seems that the immediate source of information for the British public on the event was Mr William Howard Russell of the *Times*, the first dedicated war correspondent of any newspaper, who was able to take advantage of the new cable telegraph system to relay the news back to London where it was ready for announcement within the week. From the number of soldiers who mustered following the charge – 120 – it was surmised that most of the 600+ cavalrymen had been massacred, and Mr Russell duly reported this. However, many of those who did not muster were wounded, had lost their horses, or had been captured by the Russians, so the fatalities were far fewer – Professor Lambert put them as low as 120 (though most accounts give a higher figure). Moreover, according to the professor, notwithstanding the usual incompetence and lack of

preparation displayed by the British during the campaign (and the fact that the charge was a mistake) he considers the action to have been successful; the Russians were too terrified to deploy their own cavalry again!

Also, according to the professor, Lord Tennyson was duly apprised of the revised casualty numbers but by that stage he had completed his poem and, as it was such a good one, he released it anyway.

Well, maybe other historians give a less sanguine take on this historical event than either Professor Lambert or the producers of the first film to bear its title.

High Noon remains one of my favourite films, but not *The Charge of the Light Brigade* for two reasons. The first is that it departs too widely from the historical facts. The second is that during the filming of the charge, the set was laced with trip wires to cause the horses to fall and dozens were killed. Unforgivable. Knowing this, maybe you will not want to view the charge sequence at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyqcZMsBOU4>.

Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* is a quarterly magazine. 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. 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.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

On 9.12.13 I gave a lecture at the Royal Society of Medicine (*oooooh! - Ed.*) entitled 'Personal Awareness and its Preservation over Time'. The lecture included a thought experiment which provoked a lively discussion and a surprisingly wide range of answers. I have placed the thought experiment on my Blog site, dated 26.1.14:

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

I would be very interested to have answers, feedback and discussion from anyone with an interest, either using the 'Comments' section of my Blog or direct to me by email (m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk). I hope to gather together the comments and feedback I receive and write something on the subject (the feedback will be anonymised).

A thought experiment on 'personal identity'

To understand this thought experiment it is important to accept the premise (temporarily, if you disagree with it) that conscious experience is solely the outcome of activity of the brain. There is nothing *in addition* to this, such as a soul or spirit (though of course much of conscious experience is derived from sensory input from the external world). The human brain and nervous system are structured in such a way as to make possible this activity. When the brain cannot engage in this activity we are no longer conscious. Therefore when we die there is eternal oblivion.

Now imagine that right now you are participating in a laboratory experiment in which a scientist has wired your brain up to a machine that is precisely equivalent to your brain (maybe another physiological brain or maybe a computer) and this machine is detecting and replicating exactly all the activity of your brain.

Since we have assumed that conscious experience is the outcome of activity of the brain and nothing in addition, then we can reasonably assume that the machine is experiencing consciousness and that its conscious experiences must be exactly the same as yours (what it sees, hears, feels, thinks, remembers, etc.).

Now ask yourself these questions:

- Am I --- (*your name*) or am I the machine?
- Can the scientist or anyone else help me answer this question?
- When the scientist announces that the machine is to be turned off, do I want this to happen?
- When the scientist announces that the machine *has been* turned off, what will be my reaction, if any?

As ever, I would be grateful for any thoughts on this.

A follow-up to the previous item

In the previous issue I discussed potential flaws in the design of experiments on telepathy. Recall that the basic set-up is that one of a pair of identical twins has to choose five pictures in succession and the other twin has to use his or her telepathic powers to identify which picture his or her twin is looking at. ASKE member Doug Gibbard, who knows a thing or two about these matters, sent me this advice for any aspiring mentalist:

'I recently received *The Skeptical Intelligencer* and have been sat reading it with a cup of tea and two of my better half's gorgeous warm mince pies. Now I haven't got a twin brother but if my son and I were tested for telepathy we would agree a strategy beforehand (*for four pictures - Ed.*).

'I would tell him that I would first choose the picture containing the largest

circular or near circular image. It might be a rainbow or a curve in a road but it should extend at least (say) 120 degrees. If there are no large circles/curves it could be as small as a cup and saucer on a table in a photo of a kitchen. His second selection would be the picture containing the largest square or oblong. (Squares and oblongs would be ignored when making the first selection.) The shape would not have to be a perfect square/oblong but it should be approximately that shape. It could be someone's face in a portrait or a table in a kitchen. (Sorry about the kitchen again, I think it's a subconscious desire for another mince pie.)

'The third selection would be the picture with the longest straight line. Straight lines would of course have been ignored previously. It would not have to be perfectly straight. This line could be a telegraph pole, a horizon, a pair of trousers or the edge of a kitchen table! Finally he would choose the more colourful/brightest of the final two pictures.

'I think with practice we could become very good at this. Sometimes of course the pictures might present problems but I'm sure we would not be expected to always be 100 per cent correct. Needless to say if I were conducting this test I would decide the order of the pictures and they would be presented singly. After all, if the duo were telepathic that should not make a difference.'

Thank you Dougie.

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

I have recently been reading some of Thomas Hardy's short stories (from his 'Wessex Tales') and was particularly interested in *The Withered Arm* which he wrote in 1888. It tells the story of 'a lorn milkmaid' Rhoda Brook who ekes out an impoverished existence with her 12-year-old son. The pair have been abandoned by the boy's father, wealthy Farmer Lodge who, at the start of the story, is due to arrive home with his new wife, Gertrude. Rhoda is understandably jealous of her ex-lover's bride; she sends her son to spy on the new arrival and to report back on her appearance and whether she 'shows marks of the lady on her, as I expect she do'.

As the weeks go by, Rhoda becomes obsessed with thoughts of Gertrude and one night she has a dream in which Gertrude taunts her by thrusting forward her left hand 'so as to make the wedding-ring it wore glitter in Rhoda's eyes'. In her dream Rhoda then 'seized the confronting spectre by its obtrusive left arm, and whirled it backward to the floor'.

The day after Rhoda's dream, Gertrude calls at her house. Though unaware that Rhoda's son is her new husband's child, she brings him a pair of boots as promised, and other gifts. Rhoda is stuck by her gentle appearance and kindly manner and is full of remorse and guilt about her dream. Gertrude then confides in Rhoda that she has acquired a puzzling ailment:

She uncovered her left hand and arm; and their outline confronted Rhoda's gaze as the exact original of the limb she had beheld and seized in her dream. Upon the pink round surface of the arm were faint marks of an unhealthy colour, as if produced by a rough grasp. Rhoda's eyes became riveted on the discolorations; she fancied that she discerned in them the shape of her

own four fingers. 'How did it happen?' she said mechanically. 'I cannot tell,' replied Mrs Lodge, shaking her head. 'One night when I was sound asleep, dreaming I was away in some strange place, a pain suddenly shot into my arm there, and was so keen as to awaken me. I must have struck it in the daytime, I suppose, though I don't remember doing so.'

Let us pause here and examine in more detail some elements of the story so far. Let's first see how Hardy describes Rhoda's dream.

But the figure (of Gertrude Lodge) which had occupied her so much during this and the previous days was not to be banished at night. For the first time, Gertrude Lodge visited the supplanted woman (Rhoda) in her dreams. Rhoda Brook dreamed - since her assertion that she really saw, before falling asleep, was not to be believed - that the young wife, in the pale silk dress and white bonnet, but with features shockingly distorted, and wrinkled as by age, was sitting upon her chest as she lay. The pressure of Mrs Lodge's person grew heavier; the blue eyes peered cruelly into her face: and then the figure thrust forward its left hand mockingly, so as to make the wedding-ring it wore glitter in Rhoda's eyes. Maddened mentally, and nearly suffocated by pressure, the sleeper struggled; the incubus, still regarding her, withdrew to the foot of the bed, only, however, to come forward by degrees, resume her seat, and flash her left hand as before.

And when the spectre had vanished, 'O, merciful heaven!' she cried, sitting on the edge of the bed in a cold sweat; 'that was not a dream - she was here!'

The reader may immediately recognise that Rhoda's 'dream' bears

the hallmarks of sleep paralysis, which may be at the root of some claims of nocturnal ghostly visitations and, nowadays, the appearance of extra-terrestrial beings and abduction by the same. Particularly telling is the description of 'the incubus' pressing down on Rhoda to the extent that she felt 'nearly suffocated', then withdrawing 'to the foot of the bed', then inching forward again. Like many experiences of sleep paralysis, Rhoda's is intensely realistic and frightening. But to a significant degree it is dependent on her interpretation of the physical and mental sensations and experiences associated with this phenomenon. Gertrude and the distress of her having 'supplanted' her have been Rhoda's major preoccupation for several weeks, so it would be understandable that this provided the theme for her hallucinatory experiences her sleep paralysis.

Particularly telling is the description of 'the incubus' pressing down on Rhoda to the extent that she felt 'nearly suffocated', then withdrawing 'to the foot of the bed', then inching forward again.

The next day, when Gertrude calls on her and displays her kindly and gentle nature, Rhoda's emotions turn to guilt and remorse. Now, we know that when a person is in the throes of some troublesome emotion, he or she is primed to be vigilant for any stimuli or events that could be threatening, and to have a tendency to interpret such stimuli and events accordingly (what psychologists term 'attentional' and 'interpretative biases'). So if, for example, we are afraid that burglars will break into our house during the night, we may lie awake, listening to

any noise and interpreting it as the sound of someone forcing a window or moving around downstairs. Similarly, if we are in an angry frame of mind we may, for example, be on the lookout for any indication that someone is treating us with a lack of consideration or respect, and are more apt to interpret even innocent remarks and facial expressions as evidence of this.

Thus, when Gertrude shows Rhoda the 'faint marks of an unhealthy colour' on her arm, Rhoda is thrown into a panic; *she* is responsible for these injuries and she even perceives them as marks of her own fingers.

Even so, surely it is too much of a coincidence that, the very day following Rhoda's nocturnal dream of her violently seizing Gertrude by her arm, the latter turns up at her house, complaining that some marks have mysteriously appeared on that very limb!

It is very common for memories to be adjusted, even unconsciously, so that they make a more compelling narrative.

So far I have been treating the story as though it were a true account of some actual event. Perhaps it is entirely made up, in which case a skeptical analysis is nothing more than an idle exercise. But let us assume that there is truth in the story. In that case the last point requires our serious attention.

If the story is based on events that actually happened we need to ask how accurate the details are, notably their timing and sequence. We know who the author is and we have reason to believe that, like other stories he published, this one concerns events that were part of the folklore of the locality in which he spent his childhood. The presumably fictional narrator is not identified to us but we have to assume that Rhoda herself told her side of the story to someone who then spread the word around. So the account is certain to be full of

inaccuracies, confabulations, and omissions. Concerning the timing of Rhoda's dream in relation to Gertrude's revealing to her the marks on her arm, the narrator states that it occurred the night before. Can we be sure of that? In fact, following publication of the story, Hardy is reported as saying:

Since writing this story... some years ago I have been reminded by an aged friend who knew 'Rhoda Brookes' that, in relating her dream, my forgetfulness has weakened the facts out of which the tale grew. In reality it was while lying down on a hot afternoon that the incubus oppressed her and she flung it off, with the results on the body of the original described. (John Wain, Introduction to 'Thomas Hardy: Selected Stories', London: Papermac, 1966, xiii)

Note also that Gertrude does not say that the night of *her* dream was the same as Rhoda's, only that it occurred 'one night'. Could it even be that Rhoda dreamt of her assault on Gertrude *after* Gertrude had shown her the marks on her arm, but when the time came tell her part of the story (at least six years later by my calculation), she recalled the events otherwise? It is very common for memories to be adjusted, even unconsciously, so that they make a more compelling narrative. And this also goes for anyone telling this story.

There is more to the story of skeptical interest. The condition of Gertrude's arm deteriorates and acquires a 'withered' look, much to her alarm and that of Rhoda. She consults a doctor,

But the surgeon had not seemed to understand the afflicted limb at all; he had told her to bathe it in hot water, and she had bathed it, but the treatment had done no good.

Then, during one of her encounters with Rhoda, Gertrude announces:

They tell me there is possibly one way by which I might be able to find out the cause, and so perhaps the cure of it... It is by going to some clever man over in Egdon Heath...

they said that you knew more of his movements than anybody else hereabout, and could tell me if he were still to be consulted.

The name of the man is Conjuror Trendle, but when Rhoda informs her that 'they used to say he was a - he had powers other folks have not' Gertrude retorts,

O, how could my people be so superstitious as to recommend a man of that sort! I thought they meant some medical man. I shall think no more of him.

Later however, with her condition no better, Gertrude has a change of heart. She informs Rhoda,

I have again been thinking of what they said about Conjuror Trendle. I don't really believe in such men, but I should not mind just visiting him, from curiosity.

Two hundred years later or thereabouts, we witness the same dilemma facing many people whose ailments have not yielded to the ministrations of mainstream medical practitioners. Though often skeptical of the treatments on offer from 'alternative' therapists, in their desperation they are 'willing to try anything'. And sometimes there is such a person in the locality who, like Conjuror Trendle, has a wonderful reputation for curing all sorts of conditions that have proved intractable to conventional medicine.

There is something about Conjuror Trendle that one rarely, if ever, finds in his equivalent these days: he is skeptical of his own abilities!

There is however something about Conjuror Trendle that one rarely, if ever, finds in his equivalent these days: he is skeptical of his own abilities!

He did not profess his remedial practices openly, or care anything about their continuance.... Indeed, he affected not to believe largely in his own powers, and when warts that had been shown him for cure

miraculously disappeared - which it must be owned they infallibly did - he would say lightly, 'O, I only drink a glass of grog upon 'em at your expense - perhaps it's all chance', and immediately turn the subject....(A)nd then with words of self-disparagement he examined her arm.

What a contrast to the contemporary quack! Moreover, 'He would not take a farthing'. Perhaps Conjuror Trendle is voicing the skepticism of Thomas Hardy himself. Did he have in mind the placebo effect and confirmation bias, I wonder.

On examining Gertrude's arm, Trendle's opinion is 'Medicine can't cure it... 'Tis the work of an enemy'. Gertrude herself then has to identify this person by the following means. Trendle takes a tumbler of water and an egg ('preparing it in a private way'), breaks the egg, and pours the white of the egg on the water. Gertrude then examines the tumbler's contents in order to identify 'the enemy'. She appears shocked but withholds any disclosure of what she has seen from Rhoda, who accompanies her.

Here, in the mind of the informed skeptic the terms 'apophenia' or 'pareidolia' will appear – the processes whereby random stimuli or vague patterns appear as meaningful objects and faces, or human characteristics are perceived in inanimate objects. It is human nature to attach great import to such phenomena – cf. 'the face on Mars' and the image of Jesus on a slice of toast.

The narrative then moves on half a dozen years and Gertrude's disfigured arm remains her constant pre-occupation. She and her husband have no child and their marriage has 'sank into prosiness, and worse':

The farmer was usually gloomy and silent..... The once blithe-hearted and enlightened Gertrude was changing into an irritable, superstitious woman whose whole time was given to experimenting upon her ailment with every quack remedy she came across.... her closet was lined with

bottles, packets, and ointment-pots of every description - nay, bunches of mystic herbs, charms, and books of necromancy, which in her schoolgirl time she would have ridiculed as folly.

This account of Gertrude's fate, albeit rather dramatic, will be familiar to physicians, psychiatrists and psychologists. People with intractable conditions, depending on their personalities and personal circumstances, adapt in various ways to their plight; many remain cheerful and fulfilled with their lives but at the other end of the spectrum some sink into a state of despair and, as with Gertrude, their whole existence revolves around the malady. Their spouses suffer likewise. Their lives are taken up with an endless succession of medical investigations and treatments, which not uncommonly make them feel worse, and of course they are at the mercy of quacks.

Note the vagueness of the rationale for the treatment prescribed; does it remind you not a little of some of the explanations provided by contemporary alternative practitioners?

Eventually, in desperation, Gertrude decides to consult, in secret, Conjuror Trendle again. She shows him her arm, and of her affliction he says, 'If you ever do throw it off, it will be all at once.' He then says:

You must touch with the limb the neck of a man who's been hanged..... Before he's cold - just after he's cut down'.

When she asks him, 'How can that do good?' he replies, 'It will turn the blood and change the constitution'.

Note the vagueness of the rationale for the treatment prescribed; does it remind you not a little of some of the explanations provided by contemporary alternative practitioners for their remedies! Actually the difference between 'mainstream' and 'unorth-

odox' medicine was probably less definable in those days than it is today; perhaps the 'unorthodox' remedies tended to be characterised in particular by their sheer outlandishness.

I shall not continue with the tale now, as I have covered the main points of skeptical interest and I do not wish to spoil the present reader's pleasure should he or she wish to read the story (*note 1*).

One final question is the possible diagnosis of Gertrude's condition. I am not competent to offer any suggestions, so perhaps our medically-qualified readers could offer their ideas to the editor. It is, I think, relevant to ask how severe was her disfigurement and how physically disabled it actually rendered her. Something physical was clearly present but (as I can testify from my own professional experience assessing compensation claims) it is possible for even minor disfigurements and scarring, hardly noticeable to the observer, to become a major obsession and a source of distress and crippling self-consciousness for the person affected. If this is relevant to the present case, then perhaps a point in favour of Conjuror Trendle's extreme final prescription is the energy and investment required from the patient and the fact that it is an *ordeal*. Thus the patient's success in carrying out the instructions could have a significant remedial effect on the psychological component of Gertrude's affliction.

Whatever the case, there's no doubting that Thomas Hardy couldn't half tell a good story!

Notes

1. The story can be read at:

<http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/ghost-stories-hardy.html>

but there are many mistakes in the text.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

How Welsh DOES destroy some linguists' theories!

As I remarked last time, some groups of linguists adopt general theoretical positions which are in fact disconfirmed by readily available data, or else avoid this disconfirmation only at the cost of a degree of non-specificity or abstraction which precludes empirical testing (empirical emptiness). For instance, some syntacticians (notably Chomskyans) who are committed to a basic NP+VP analysis of sentence structure (Noun Phrase + Verb Phrase; thus, Subject-Verb-Object or Subject-Object-Verb word-order) appear to assume that their theory (often left undefended) is so secure as to 'trump' any disconfirming data. However, there are many languages – the best known are Welsh and Tagalog, the main language of the Philippines – where the Subject NP normally separates the Verb from the Object NP (Verb-Subject-Object word order). An example from Welsh is *gwelodd y dyn y ddraig*, 'the man saw the dragon', literally 'saw the man the dragon'. This is in fact the third most common (among those languages which actually have subjects and objects; some languages, such as Basque, arguably do not) of the six possible basic word orders (compare English with Subject-Verb-Object, Japanese or Latin with Subject-Object-Verb). But those committed to the NP+VP analysis have to adopt contrived and sometimes empirically indemonstrable analyses of Welsh and Tagalog sentences involving covert underlying/abstract NP+VP ordering. On these analyses, Welsh speakers first think of such sentences with the English word-order but perversely swap the Subject and the Verb around before they actually say or write them! (You can tell from this that linguists like Chomsky did **not** grow up speaking Welsh.) Or, at the very least,

Chomskyan linguists struggle to analyse these structures; see for example Elizabeth J. Pyatt 'Incomplete Subject Raising and Government: Deriving Welsh Surface Word Order', JSTOR: *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, XII (1992), pp. 135-165, available at <http://www.jstor.org/pss/20557243>. (If you actually follow up this reference, feel free to contact me for discussion!) This is an excellent example of an issue where **mainstream** linguistics clearly invites skeptical attention. For more on all this, see Chapter 12 of my book *Strange Linguistics*; Munich; Lincom-Europa; 2013).

Chinese is really not so much a language as a family of closely related languages with similar structures, united by a shared cultural tradition and a common logographic written script.

Numbers revisited

Two issues ago I was discussing some linguistic issues regarding numbers. The 'Arabic' (apparently ultimately Indian) characters used to represent numbers (integers) are in fact anomalous in alphabetic scripts – such as the Roman alphabet used to write English and many other languages – because they are 'logographic': each character holistically represents an entire word, not an individual sound (as in an alphabet) or a sequence of sounds. The symbols do not, therefore, express the phonology (pronunciation) of the integer-names, and they are thus cross-linguistic. For example, the character 4 represents English *four*, French *quatre*, Malay *empat* and all equivalent words equally well, and is read off by users of each language with

the relevant language-specific pronunciation.

In this respect, these symbols resemble Chinese characters, which are often pronounced quite differently in Mandarin and the various *fangyan* ('dialects') of Chinese such as Cantonese, Hokkien, etc.; for instance, the character meaning 'person' is read as *ren* in Mandarin, *yan* in Cantonese, etc. This arises because Chinese is really not so much a language as a family of closely related languages with similar structures, united by a shared cultural tradition and a common logographic written script (which suits Chinese very well, for this and other reasons).

In the case of integers, the concepts are so basic and so universally shared that the words of different languages can be represented by common symbols in this way even if these languages have very different vocabulary and grammar structures in other respects. **All** languages have a word for 'four' – except for some 'tribal' languages which (as stated before) have only rudimentary integer systems.

The degree to which these symbols reflect the spoken and the full written forms of the integer-names **does** vary when they are used in **positional combinations**. For instance, complex symbols such as 18 reflect the structure of languages where the word itself (e.g. French *dix-huit*) literally means 'ten (and) eight' better than that of English with its *eighteen*. And single-stem words such as Russian *sorok* ('forty'; **not** related in form to the words for 'four' and 'ten'), and the many such words in languages like Hindi, are not transparently expressed by logographic forms such as 40. Nevertheless, the system itself is much clearer – and much easier to use in arithmetic – than other systems such as Roman

numerals, and it works very well in a wide range of language communities.

Chinese and some other languages instead use non-‘Arabic’ logographic symbols; in the case of Chinese, these are obviously of the same nature as Chinese characters generally. Some such number-symbols, notably ‘Arabic’ 1, appear motivated: the symbol 1 is a single stroke. The Chinese symbol is also a single stroke but in this case horizontal, it is doubled and trebled for ‘two’ and ‘three’ respectively. Most of the ‘Arabic’ symbols, however, appear arbitrary: for example, the character 2 does not obviously express the meaning ‘two’. In **this** respect these symbols do resemble letters of an alphabet, which do not automatically express the sounds which they represent; their pronunciations have to be learned by users of other scripts, even where a character exists in both systems. For instance, in the Cyrillic alphabet used to write Russian, C represents /s/ and P is /r/, as in CCCP = SSSR = ‘USSR’.

On a ‘fringe’ claim in this area, see my Numbers and Angles, at <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/> (2010), and now also p. 144 of my *Strange Linguistics*.

A tone-deaf teenager who spent weeks in hospital with concussion injuries has subsequently discovered the ability to play 13 musical instruments.

Part-time Japanese, sudden talents

A little while ago I discussed the (alleged) phenomenon of multiple personalities (‘Dissociative Identity Disorder’). In *The Sun* on 15/12/13 it was reported that a British woman called Kimi has 14 personalities manifesting various ages (some very young), both genders, a range of accents, etc. Most strikingly, one (male) personality is identified as Japanese and has the name Satou. My question is: does Satou speak Japanese (which Kimi is not reported to have

learned)? If so, how? Is this a possibly genuine case of xenoglossia? If not, how can he ‘be’ Japanese (culturally, etc.)?

Re my piece two issues ago about the sudden emergence of linguistic and musical abilities after trauma: a tone-deaf teenager who spent weeks in hospital with concussion injuries has subsequently discovered the ability to play 13 musical instruments. (My initial source was Sky News, 23/11/13.)

Talking body-parts

See pp. 200-202 of my *Strange Linguistics* (Munich; Lincom-Europa; 2013) on sound-related theories and therapies. A new diagnostic and therapeutic technique known as VoiceBio – also called Voice BioAnalysis or BioHarmonics – is ‘based on the idea that internal organs communicate with each other through sound waves’; dysfunctions can be detected by computer-assisted analysis of a patient’s voice. One ‘certified practitioner’, Sharon Gardner, is also identified as a ‘Yoga of the Voice practitioner, therapeutic sound practitioner, healing music composer, community healing choir director, spiritual guide, shamanic soundworker, [and] muse/mentor’. Skeptical comment by the medically-trained Stephen Barrett can be found at:

<http://www.devicewatch.org/reports/voicebio/overview.shtml>.

More pseudo-historical linguistics

John Chaple believes that he can demonstrate fallacies in historical chronology; for example, he holds that many of the ‘medieval’ roads of England must have been built long before the Roman roads, in pre-historic times. He goes on from ideas of this kind to develop seriously revisionist perspectives on history and historical linguistics. Some of his ideas are reminiscent of those of Mick Harper (*The History of Britain Revealed: The Shocking Truth About the English Language*, 2nd edn., London, 2007, etc.; for comment see pp. 60-61 of my

Strange Linguistics and references provided there). For instance, he too argues that close ancestors of English were used in Britain in pre-Roman times, alongside Celtic, and were not introduced in late-Roman & post-Roman times as is normally held. A date as early as 4500 BCE for the arrival of pre-English-speakers is proposed.

Chaple also embraces as probably reliable the largely fanciful ‘history’ of Britain written by the 12th-Century clergyman-scholar Geoffrey of Monmouth (the source for the stories of Gog & Magog, Old King Cole, King Lear, etc.), according to which Britain was settled by the Trojan prince Brutus. He accepts Geoffrey’s undemonstrated claim that his work is based on a supposedly older (7th-Century) Welsh text (which, even if it were genuinely older, might itself be largely fantasy), and suggests that the ‘truth’ of Geoffrey’s narrative has been suppressed by orthodox scholars. For more on this, see my piece ‘A tale of two Arthurs’, *The Skeptic* (Australia) 21:1 (2001), pp. 47-52, available at: <http://www.skeptics.com.au/publications/magazine/>.

Chaple also links the Druids (as described by Geoffrey) with the Phoenicians (in the context of the development of the Greek Alphabet) and makes various other claims which are speculative or worse.

Overall the level of linguistic sophistication is inadequate, conflicting evidence is soft-peddled, and the general claim is in no way demonstrated.

As far as the earlier history of the English language is concerned, Chaple argues that it arose much further east than the Germanic-speaking area of Europe, in Anatolia (modern Asiatic Turkey). Here – misled by naïvely ‘gung-ho’ newspaper headlines written by amateurs – he is grotesquely misunderstanding recent phases of the ongoing debate as to the precise

location and date of Proto-Indo-European, the unattested and reconstructed ancestor of the Indo-European language ‘family’ and thus the **ultimate ancestor** of English!

Some of the individual points made in this context by Chaple and his correspondents are not without interest; but overall the level of linguistic sophistication is inadequate, conflicting evidence is soft-pedalled, and the general claim is in no way demonstrated.

For Chaple’s material, one could start at:

<http://www.johnchapple.co.uk/index.html>.

More fun things

The Indian pseudo-historian and pseudo-linguist P.N. Oak is unable to grasp the fact that words sometimes have (legitimately) multiple unconnected meanings (homonymy). He argues, for instance, that when the holders of BA degrees marry they should be required to have their titles altered to MMA or MWA! But what if you are already married when you get your degree? What if you are a young male fur-seal, also known as a *bachelor*? And, on this account, how can a woman become a BA in the first place, given the gender-specific core meaning of *bachelor*? Is she a **Spinster** of Arts?

Most Indian speakers of English would not go along with Oak here; but they do often assume that features specific to Indian English will be understood around the world. An Indian colleague at the National University of Singapore, in a lecture, gave the then population of India as ‘70 crores’ (‘700 million’). Afterwards I suggested to him that local students, especially those not of Indian ethnicity, might not have understood. At the start of his next lecture he said ‘In case you don’t know the word *crore*, a crore is 100 lakhs’. And an Indian student at Leeds University, not yet aware of differences in greeting formulae, came into his professor’s office looking perplexed and hurt. He said ‘I said to this fellow, Where are you going? –

and do you know what he said to me, Professor? Mind your own bloody business, that’s what he said!’. A Singaporean might instead have started with ‘Taken your lunch?’, even at 11 a.m. or 3 p.m.

Some non-native English is very amusing indeed (and I say this with full appreciation of the efforts made by many to learn the world’s dominant language). A Malaysian airline once proudly advertised that it would ‘take your bags and send them in all directions’. And the instructions on a drinks machine in Singapore proclaimed: PRESS DESIRABLE KEY AND UNTIL IT STOP POURING. DISASTER OCCUR, PHONE NUMBER IN BOTTOM. Of course, some native-speaker performances are also entertaining. I once heard a prescriptivist amateur, phoning in to a radio show, say ‘What I hate most in modern talk is all this mispronunciation’! More of these as we go.

Many expressions are deictic; their meaning involves the place or time of utterance, the identity of the speaker or other aspects of the non-linguistic context.

Some online information about language matters, while not ‘fringe’, is less than accurate. I subscribe to ‘Word of the Day’ on

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

On 25/11/13 the word was *decant*; the explanation stated that the word ‘originally comes from the Latin word *canth* meaning “spout, rim of a vessel”’. No Latin words end in *-th*!

Another example of a non-native variety of English displaying more complexity than native usage (as discussed last time) involves the distinction between ‘specific’ and ‘non-specific’ noun-phrases. In native-speaker English, sentences such as *Jane is planning to marry a Dutchman* have two semantically (and logically) distinct meanings (‘a specific

Dutchman’ or ‘some so-far unknown Dutchman’). But in many Asian languages these propositions are distinguished; and in consequence Asian speakers of English often distinguish them in English too (*to marry one Dutchman, to marry Dutchman*).

Some words take on unexpected meanings in new situations. An African-American anthropology student working in Papua-New Guinea was surprised and disappointed to find that the locals treated him exactly as they treated his white colleagues. Essaying his creole, he eventually asked one local for an explanation. ‘Mi blakman alsem yu’ = ‘I am a black man like you’. The reply was classic: ‘No, yu no blakman, yu blakfela waitman’. (‘You are not a PNG-person; you are a dark-coloured westerner’.)

Like English *north*, Malay *utara* etc. (again, see last time), many expressions are **deictic**; their meaning involves the place or time of utterance, the identity of the speaker or other aspects of the non-linguistic context. A special case of this involves the Indian dialect-name *Jangli*, cognate with the word *jungle*. *Jangli* is always the variety used by the people in what an Australian would call the ‘deep bush’, where things are allegedly less sophisticated than in the location where the speaker lives. No-one describes their **own** usage as *Jangli*! At least one linguist has been driven to distraction looking for this dialect.

Another recent example of a verb being used in the active when a passive might have been expected, like *building, releasing* etc. Seen in a Rugby League World Cup match programme: *this Test Match also classified as a World Cup qualifier* (‘was classified’, ‘counted as’).

More next time!

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

NON-STANDARD THEORIES INVOLVING THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LANGUAGE

Mark Newbrook

Mark Newbrook has been associated as a lecturer and researcher with universities in Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia and the UK. His main areas of research interest are dialectology, controversies in historical linguistics and skeptical linguistics generally.

Way back in 2003-04, when I returned to the UK from Australia, I published a series of articles in the *Skeptical Adversaria* regarding current skeptical issues (especially but not exclusively linguistic in character) arising in various different countries: Australia, New Zealand, India. Obviously, many other countries and territories could be treated in the same way.

The Dogon are supposed to be aware of the white dwarf companion star of Sirius, which was not discovered by astronomers until the 1860

There are very many non-mainstream (often 'fringe') claims concerning Ancient Egypt. Many such claims involve: (a) the Ancient Egyptian language (written in hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic scripts); (b) the related, somewhat later Coptic language (written in a Greek-derived script); (c) other relevant or supposedly relevant languages (Hellenistic Greek as used in Ptolemaic Egypt in the last three centuries BCE; also Hebrew, Latin, African languages, etc.); (d) the histories of all these languages and of the scripts used to write them. Egyptologists (whether or not they can themselves read Egyptian or are familiar with linguistics) and skeptics with an interest in history and/or language might find these matters worthy of consideration. Here I summarise some of the more striking claims of this kind.

Laird Scranton has made extensive claims involving links between Egyptian, African and Buddhist thought; these are linked with the ideas of Marcel Griaule and Robert Temple about the cosmological knowledge of the Dogon tribe in Mali (West Africa). The Dogon are supposed to be aware of the white dwarf companion star of Sirius, which was not discovered by astronomers until the 1860s, and to have experienced early contact with Egypt (and Mesopotamia). The claims of Scranton and especially Temple involve the non-mainstream philological-cum-etymological methods used by many non-linguists; as I have repeatedly explained in ASKE fora, many such writers wrongly assume that superficial, unsystematic similarities between isolated pairs of words in different languages (here including Ancient Egyptian) demonstrate unrecognised links between these languages and the associated cultures. Scranton also relies in places upon E.A. Wallis Budge's out-dated and over-extrapolated transliterations of Egyptian.

Ralph Ellis proposes links between Egypt and Palestine, including etymological links of the same loose kind. It is generally accepted that Egyptian and the Semitic languages (Hebrew, Phoenician etc.) did have a deep-time common ancestor; but Ellis believes in much more recent connections which the evidence does not support.

Many amateur historical linguists of an 'Afrocentrist' persuasion hold that words (and loosely similar sounds)

from Ancient Egyptian, Ge'ez (the classical language of Ethiopia) and other widely-distributed and apparently unrelated African languages have common origins. The intention is to argue that all African languages really belong to one family, possibly descended from Ancient Egyptian. In addition, Afrocentrists generally believe that very many cultural and linguistic features around the world are of relatively recent (unacknowledged) African origin. These ideas are seen in many circles as 'politically correct' and as probably accurate; but they are not supported by the evidence. Martin Bernal (who is more sophisticated than most Afrocentrist writers but has been cogently critiqued by historical linguists) and (in a different vein) R.A. Strong and Bernard Macklin argue that Ancient Greek, specifically, borrowed very heavily indeed from Egyptian as part of an Egyptian cultural 'invasion' of Greece. (Temple too includes Greek in his linguistic equations.)

Ann Walker, who reports her experiences channelling messages in various languages from 'spirits', makes outlandish claims involving Egyptian and Coptic, and also Hellenistic Greek. She presents 'Egyptian' and 'Coptic' expressions in apparently invented scripts, and novel, mostly unpronounceable expressions in the Greek alphabet, which she identifies as Greek and 'translates' to suit her purposes.

Paul White and some other 'hyper-diffusionist' writers who believe that civilisation spread around the world from unrecognised sources have

advanced claims regarding Egyptian inscriptions in the Americas and Australasia, supposedly left by early Egyptian voyagers. Most of this material is transparently faked (some of it features basic errors in the use of hieroglyphs).

Some authors attack the accepted 19th-Century decipherment of Egyptian. David Leonardi argues that both Biblical Hebrew and Ancient Egyptian have been badly misanalysed by mainstream scholars, that the two languages were much more closely related than is generally held (compare

Ellis), and that Biblical Hebrew in particular was close to an implausibly recent ultimate mother language. He also suggests, implausibly, that various native Egyptian words are derived from Hellenistic Greek or even Latin words. Tarek Abdel offers his own non-standard decipherments of the texts. Some Latter-Day Saints sources continue to promote the veracity of the 'Reformed Egyptian' (otherwise unknown) in their *Book of Abraham* and associated works; but the short Egyptian texts which they present as having been transmitted to their

founders have subsequently been deciphered in very different terms.

In contrast, Okasha El Daly holds that the Egyptian script had already been deciphered in the 9th Century CE by Arab scholars (some of whom admittedly did realise that by dynastic times the characters, contrary to appearances, were mainly phonological rather than logographic).

References for all these claims can be obtained from the author c/o morcusporcus@btinternet.com.

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A PRELIMINARY TEST OF A CLAIM OF COMMUNICATION BY SPIRITS THROUGH A COMPUTER

Michael Heap

Michael Heap is a clinical and forensic psychologist and Chairman of ASKE

Around October of last year ASKE was contacted by a person, whom I shall refer to as 'C' (for claimant), who wished to submit a claim for testing by ASKE. The claim concerned messages from the spirits of deceased people. Briefly she asserted that these messages ('spirit voices') were appearing on recordings that she had made on her computer but that they could also be made to appear, by indirect means, on any another computer.

Initially the claim was subjected to a preliminary test by Mr Tony Youens of ASKE but there appeared to be some technical problems. I therefore paid a visit to C with my wife in February to discuss the claim further.

At our meeting, C made a number of claims about the spirits, amongst whom she identified deceased members of her family. Firstly she said that the spirits had initially caused her blood to be discharged from some existing scars and in the resulting stains on her clothing were the faces of the deceased persons and other images. Since then, C had adopted the method

of deliberately creating these stains by pricking herself. She showed me an album in which she had kept dozens of pieces of blood-stained material and pointed out some of the images. To me, the stains were similar to Rorschach inkblots (though not symmetrical) and in most of them one could discern, in the usual way, various meaningful pictures. However, C informed me that she had scanned onto her computer thousands of small samples - i.e. details - from these stains, and these had yielded many interesting images. (Prior to my visit, C had sent me by email attachment an example of one such detail in which she identified several faces. With minimal effort I could see the profile of an old lady but none of the images C had marked.)

C also told me about the spirit messages on her computer. She played some of these for me to hear. The recordings were very noisy - I presume the sounds were of electronic interference - and I cannot say just from the small sample played to me that I discerned anything that could convincingly be a voice, but perhaps

some familiarity is needed. C also played a video recording a friend had sent her of him seated in front of the camera and at one point I certainly heard a man speaking. I observed that this occurred when the person himself was moving his lips in such a manner, so it appeared to me, as to suggest that he himself was the vocaliser, but C explained that this was not the case. (Again, prior to my visit, C had sent me a recording entitled 'You think your breath is complicated'; this is quite noisy [the continuous background sound reminds me of cascading water] and there is what might be a very indistinct voice at the beginning that could be uttering the words in question - but, of course, knowing what to expect influences what one hears.)

C also played a number of AV recordings that people had uploaded on YouTube. The sources of these videos were unknown to C but she explained that they contained hidden messages directed to her from the spirits. For example a boy shouted something that sounded like her first name.

In addition, C informed me that the spirits had showed an ability to 'degrade diamonds' and to heal people. She showed my wife and me two diamond rings whose value, she said, had been diminished by damage done to them by the spirits. We examined these with a magnifying lens; nothing seemed amiss to our untutored eyes but an expert opinion would have been necessary. (C thoughtfully warned us prior to our visit that my wife should consider not wearing any diamonds as these could suffer by being present at our meeting. My wife took the risk of wearing her diamond ring but at the time of writing it does not seem to the unaided eye that any changes have occurred.)

C and I agreed that it would be unlikely for the visual and auditory phenomena that she described to be amenable to the kind of test that would indicate if these were beyond explanation by scientific means, as they rely too much on subjective opinion. (Tony Youens had already broached the idea with C of asking the spirits to provide some information that would be unknown to her – e.g. the contents of an envelope prepared by the investigators or some personal information about the investigators that C could not be privy to. However, she explained that the spirits had indicated in no uncertain terms that this was unacceptable to them and in any case they did not claim to have psychic abilities.)

Testing the claim concerning diamonds would also be difficult as it would require measurements undertaken by a specialist in this field (and C also indicated that the effect couldn't be guaranteed always to occur).

There was one prediction, however, that did appear to be unusual and amenable to testing. C informed me that if I made a recording of 'silence' on my PC and emailed it to her, not only would the downloaded copy on her PC contain new sounds due to the intervention of the spirits, but, once she had made the download, these sounds

would also appear on the copy on my PC. There does not appear to be any rational or scientific explanation why my copy should be affected in this way simply as a result of her downloading my recording (an event which, for the sake of brevity, I shall refer to as *D*). Of course, for the purposes of testing the prediction, it does not really matter what paranormal explanation is made, only that a rational explanation is unavailable.

We agreed therefore that after I had returned home I would perform a preliminary test of this claim (the aim being to assess its feasibility and identify any problems that may arise). I would prepare a 25-second recording of 'silence' on my PC (i.e. a recording of the room in which my PC was located with any extraneous sound minimised as far as possible). I would make my own notes on what sounds, if any, were audible on playback. Next I would send the recording to one or more people as an email attachment to store on their equipment and retain the copy myself. I would then send a copy to C as an email attachment. Following *D* I would listen to my copy for any changes and would also send it again to the other assessors and they would compare it with the version I sent earlier

C also stipulated that the recording must be made using the internal microphone; Tony Youens had used an external microphone and she later explained that 'external mic's block off their attempts to transfer their signal (these spirits are not "in the air" so to speak)'. She also said that external speakers should be used to listen to the recordings, and headphones would not be of use. She also informed me that there was a risk that because I had brought my laptop into her presence, the spirits might already have got into it and if this were so, the test would not be feasible.

Some days later I made a recording as described above. The recording level was set at a level at which, had I spoken, my voice would have been heard loud and clear on playback. I

also performed the additional control of uploading the recording onto my website and placing a copy on a memory stick. Clearly these copies should not change because they would not be downloaded onto C's PC. Through two external speakers attached to my PC, with the volume at maximum and my ear close to one speaker, I could hear nothing, not even a change in the quiet background noise when the playback began and ended. I emailed the recording to three people, one of whom was my wife, instructing them to listen to the recording in the manner that I had done. I then emailed it to C with my description of its contents.

C then informed me that on receiving the recording she had not downloaded it but had forwarded it to a friend who would then play it to her over the telephone so she could listen to it prior to *D*. Her friend had then given her a description of its contents, which corresponded to those reported above. This friend was convinced that I had muted the microphone when I made the recording and C was seeking expert opinion on this. I reassured her that the microphone had not been muted. However, she asked for another recording with my voice at the beginning and end and I duly complied, repeating the above procedure. On this occasion I also copied the recording into a second file (also placed on the memory stick and not sent to C).

As well as my voice, on this recording I heard some faint 'clunks' before and after both occasions of my speaking but no alteration in the background noise. These noises were similar to some on practice recordings that I had previously made and I took them to be either internal electronic noises (my PC 'crackles' when it is busy) and/ or noises from the room such as the creaking of my chair.

I should add here that during the course of our email exchanges C had warned me that once I had performed the test and she had downloaded a recording from me, my PC 'will be of

no use for further demonstrations because if the spirits manage to tune into it, any future recordings you make will show signs of (i.e.) distorted noise, quiet “natural hiss” gone decibels louder, or even actual voices’.

When I understood from C that she had downloaded the two recordings I sent them again to the three assessors. They reported no differences in the two recordings from their respective predecessors. (With the exception of my wife, they knew nothing of the purpose of the test and were not specifically asked to detect any additional noises on the second occasion.) In both cases, I myself could detect no difference between the recordings now on my PC, my recollection of the recordings when I first heard them, and the copies I had made that were not subject to *D*.

I informed C that the results of this preliminary test were negative. It then transpired from C that she had only been able to download the second recording (she explained that the first one ‘displayed a red warning’).

Consequently only this recording was part of this preliminary test.

I then invited C to discuss with me any modifications to the protocol that would be appropriate for taking the testing further.

The various recordings can be heard by going to my website at www.mheap.com and following the instructions on the home page.

Throughout the testing period, it was important to make it clear that the test only concerned itself with changes to the recordings on my PC following *D* (as detected by me or by others who received them from me) and not any differences between what I heard on my PC prior to *D* and what C hears on her PC following *D*.

C informed me that on listening to my second recording on her system she has noticed noises that were not described by me before sending it to her. She described what have described as ‘knocks’ as ‘interference’. She tells

me that other people have also noticed these on their PCs. She offered to send me a Dictaphone recording of this or to play it over the telephone for me. However I expressed my opinion that these investigations were not part of the agreed protocol and in any case it seems to me that if there are such differences (inferred by C only from my brief verbal description of what I hear on my PC) there could be quite rational explanations. C however considers that the sounds arise because ‘your PC is already affected (*by spirits, through bringing it to her home*), but cannot pick out the noises heard here due to differences in quality of PC built-in microphone and internal/external speakers etc.’.

The various recordings can be heard by going to my website at www.mheap.com and following the instructions on the home page.

I would like to thank ‘C’ for inviting ASKE to investigate her claim and for her patience in cooperating with this preliminary test.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

A Natural History of Ghosts. 500 years of hunting for proof by Roger Clarke, 2012. Penguin Books, London. ISBN: 978-0-141-04808-6.

Richard Rawlins

Being brought up in a haunted rectory clearly had an effect on Roger Clarke who became the youngest member of the Society for Psychical Research at 14 and published his first ghost story at 15. His review of 500 years of hunting for proof of ghosts nevertheless retains just the right degree of scepticism to give us all an entertaining insight to the world beyond reason where presently unaccounted for forces may (we have to acknowledge ‘may’) be at work.

There is no more point challenging ghost-believers to prove they have seen apparitions than expecting sceptics to rise to the bait of being challenged to

prove they do not exist. The principle that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence if they are to attract any rational belief is fundamental, and well espoused in Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* of 1794. No one has ever seen a ghost in the sense that photons have departed an apparition, travelled to an eye, stimulated a retina, and resulted in physico-chemical forces passing down neurons to the optical cortex where a sentient being experiences ‘sight’. But many people have had experiences so similar that they have been unable to distinguish between them. Intensity of

emotion and heightened imagination against a background of social, environmental, historical and political events are themselves powerful forces, at times reaching a level of transcendence which may variously be felt as divine or ‘supernatural’. The existence of those imaginative experiences is no proof of the immanent reality of their causative agents and Roger Clarke is wise enough to simply set out a rational taxonomy of ghosts and descriptions of many fascinating and intellectually illuminating examples of those experiences. ‘The heart of the ghost

was the live brain of the person looking at it.’

There has never been a demonstration of supernatural spirits or forces which cannot be reproduced by a competent magician.

The Anglican vicar John Wesley also lived in a haunted house, and many early Methodists readily accepted ghosts. The Catholic Church originally deemed ghosts as being pagan but then accepted them to a degree. Spiritualist churches invoke spirits to this day, and it is only a matter of semantics as to whether the souls of the departed can be described as ghosts or not. Generally a ghost is expected to have demonstrated some degree of physical reality. Spirits remain psychical. Physical evidence of a ghost is not always by vision - spectral noises are commonly claimed to have been manifest on these occasions – knocking, tapping and scraping particularly, voices less often. But as Clarke points out, in general ‘No one asks whether you have *heard* a ghost; people ask whether you have *seen* one - for apparitions do not exist unless there is someone to see them’.

A Natural History of Ghosts sets out not only cases where ghosts have been sincerely claimed to have been experienced but also where there has been clear evidence of deception and fraud. Whether these cases should be included in a book on ‘ghosts’ is a moot point. In 1760 the Cock Lane ghost attracted large crowds including royalty, and the landlord of the haunted property did well out of charging an entry fee to visit the site. Horace Walpole called it an ‘audition’ not ‘apparition’ – as it had been heard and not seen. Samuel Johnson was taken in. It took a while, but it eventually became clear that the claims of the landlord and his daughter about ghostly knockings were motivated out of the fun of a prank, revenge over alleged murder, default on a loan, and blackmail. Basically, straightforward fraud. Indeed there has never been a demonstration of supernatural spirits or forces which cannot be reproduced by a competent magician. In which case we all have to ask what is more likely - that deliberate deception is being perpetrated or that ghosts are ‘real’?

Clarke’s vibrant account provides an excellent basis for further study. We can endorse his opinion that ‘The reason we love ghost stories is not just because they explain what happens at

the end of our lives but because they take us to the beginning and we reconnect to our childhood, pleasurably’. If ghost-believers are content and comfortable with their experiences, so be it. If they seek to enmesh others in a farrago of nonsense, and particularly if they perpetrate fraud, they are deserving of the severest censure. Clarke closes his history by recalling that the magician Harry Houdini offered many exposures of fraudulent ghosts, spiritualists and séances. He also agreed with his wife that should he be able to contact her after he had ‘passed to the other side’ she would experience a code word - namely: ‘Believe’. She never had such an experience, but every year on the anniversary of Houdini’s death, magicians around the world hold séances, just in case. Roger Clarke’s *Natural History* is an engrossing stimulus for better understanding of where these experiences come from, and most importantly, why. Happy hunting.

Richard Rawlins is a consultant orthopaedic surgeon, Member of the Magic Circle, and author of ‘Secrets of Alternative Medicine – Exposed’.

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The South Shields Poltergeist VisionTV (online)

‘Swiftsure’

<https://www.badthinking.wordpress.com/>

When *The South Shields Poltergeist* was published in 2008 (*note 1*) it came in for heavy criticism from the outset. The book was written by Mike Hallowell and Darren Ritson, described on Mike Hallowell’s website by veteran paranormal writer Guy Lyon Playfair as two ‘dedicated amateurs’ (*note 2*). But dedicated or not, the result was a totally unconvincing account of an alleged poltergeist haunting in an otherwise normal household. (The link or its contents might change later, but I have a copy

of the page to resolve any disputes about its contents that might arise later.)

Most of the criticism the authors faced when the book was published (apart from the fact that it was utter tosh) was the fact that they have not publicly released any of the evidence they say they have that would support what they believe to be a genuine case of paranormal activity. Among the many excuses they made for not publicising their evidence was the claim that to do so might compromise

the possibility of having a TV documentary made if a producer could not have access to evidence that had not been used elsewhere. (The authors also lambasted their critics for criticising them without examining their evidence, oblivious to the fact that they would not let anyone else see it anyway, except fellow believers who also would not – or were not allowed to – release it into the public domain.)

Well, things might change now because a Canadian company has produced a ‘documentary’ that features

the eponymous spirit, and you can see it online (*note 3*). (Until recently it could not be viewed from the UK unless one went through a proxy server, but the link appears to be working now – at least as I write this.) So now that their long hoped-for documentary has been made, perhaps Mike and Darren will be releasing their long-awaited confirmation of a genuine poltergeist event?

The result was a totally unconvincing account of an alleged poltergeist haunting in an otherwise normal household.

Personally, I think there's a better chance of Myleene Klass turning up at Mike's front door wearing nothing but baby oil and a smile, asking, 'How about it, big boy?'. (At least there is no doubt that Myleene exists, so the possibility is there, however remote that possibility might be.)

The documentary itself deals with three alleged poltergeist hauntings, including the South Shields case. It's embarrassing to watch, however, because the standard techniques of the woo documentary makers are clear to see. For example, dramatic reconstructions that bear no resemblance to reality are the norm in this sort of show, and anyone who has read the actual book will realise that there is no similarity between the photographs of the house portrayed in the book, and the overly dramatic and sinister portrayal of the house in the documentary.

It appears that none of the authors' original 'evidence' has been used anyway, and especially not the absurd 'bottle footage' that Mike had removed from the internet after it came in for so much laughter and derision, even from people who believe in the paranormal.

There is, however, some sceptical input from Chris French, who says that the most likely explanation for events like this can be hoaxes, misperceptions of events and so on. But later, the host

of the show, Darryll Walsh asks what the scientific evidence says about it all – but does he return to Chris French or go to any other scientist? No, of course not; his first 'scientific analyst' is Guy Lyon Playfair, non-scientist, who reckons it must be real (he's been writing about the paranormal for decades, after all, so you just have to take his word for it.).

The other 'scientific' answer from a non-scientist comes from Alan Murdie, a British barrister who is also chairman of The Ghost Club of Great Britain. Unfortunately, like his commentary (*note 4*), he presents his case in the manner of a lawyer defending a client he knows to be guilty. No doubt the believers will lap it all up. (I have a copy of that page, too, just in case.)

Obviously, neither the book nor this pathetic excuse for a documentary has a believability level that has drawn the serious (like, it's real) attention of any reputable news organisations – the BBC, for instance – or any genuinely scientific organisation. It's one for the seriously dedicated believer who doesn't have the time or the inclination to be weighed down with the burden of thinking for him or herself.

But I like to be optimistic about things, so the fact that the long-awaited documentary has now materialised, as it were, means that perhaps now is the time that Mike and Darren will release all that evidence they say they have, and prepare to be invited to present their findings at the Royal Institution, followed by the presentation of their joint Nobel Prize for discovering a hitherto unknown force of nature that goes beyond – or even explains – the quantum physics that the most brilliant minds on Earth have been struggling with for over a hundred years.

(No, I don't think so, either.)

(The woo brigade are always claiming 'quantum' this, 'quantum' that, after all, despite the fact that no quantum physicist would entertain such nonsense for a moment. Even if there are any scientists familiar with quantum physics who believe in the paranormal and think it can be

explained by subatomic phenomena, not one of them has provided evidence, proof or even a mathematical foundation for such claims.)

But the documentary is now out, and with the help of my sceptical powers (that I have vowed to use only for good), I predict that the authors of this bedtime story will still find excuses for not showing us the evidence.

The book's hype says that this is one of the most disturbing books you will ever read. That might be true for the uncritical believers, but for the rest of us, it's just a bit disturbing that there are that many credulous people around to spend the money that keeps this sort of nonsense in vogue. As for the 'documentary', I can see the authors' fans wetting themselves in fear, while everyone else is wetting themselves with laughter.

In the UK, like many other countries, it is a legal requirement that all children receive at least a basic education, but it's not a legal requirement that anyone has to learn anything. The ones that don't are the people that keep this nonsense alive because of bad thinking.

Notes

1. M.J. Hallowell & Darren W. Ritson (2007) *The South Shields Poltergeist: One Family's Fight against an Invisible Intruder*, History Press.
2. <http://www.mikehallowell.com/shieldspolt/page13.html>
3. <http://www.visiontv.ca/videos/supernatural-investigator-204-poltergeist-phenomenon/>
4. <http://www.mikehallowell.com/shieldspolt/page12.html>

The Lost History of the Little People: Their Spiritually Advanced Civilizations around the World by Susan B. Martinez, 2013. Bear & Company, Rochester (Vermont) & Toronto, pp. xv + 384. ISBN: 978-1-59143-145-9; ebook ISBN: 978-1-59143-804-5.

Mark Newbrook

Susan B. Martinez is unusual among advocates/users of blatantly non-standard methods in comparative historical linguistics in that she has a semi-relevant PhD (in Anthropology, from Columbia) and indeed a specialisation in ethnolinguistics. Perhaps she has never studied the specifically **historical** aspects of the discipline, but even then her approach (one which is nowadays typical only of untutored amateurs) is surprising. If she **is** in fact familiar with historical linguistics but **rejects** mainstream thinking on the methodology of the subject, she should state this openly and should **argue** for her own position.

Martinez's shift away from mainstream thought (on linguistic and other issues) seems to be connected with her discovery in 1981 of the 'Oahspe Bible', a tome produced in 1882 by John Ballou Newbrough by way of automatic writing. This work represents itself as containing new revelations from 'the Embassadors of the angel hosts of heaven prepared and revealed unto man in the name of Jehovih'. Much of the Oahspe material involves non-standard accounts of early human history. Martinez embraced these notions and they occupy a central place in her subsequent work, where there are many specific references to the Oahspe text as if it were historically authoritative.

Oahspe itself contains some strange linguistic material: it is connected with 'Mantong' as promoted by Richard Shaver (see pp. 102-103 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*), and the text begins with a three-page glossary of 'strange words used in this book'; these are a peculiar mixture of known

words and phrases from English (such as *angel*) or other human languages (such as *Abracadabra*) – many of them re-defined in Oahspian terms – and unfamiliar words.

In her own book, Martinez argues that *Homo sapiens* originated in 'pygmy'/'negrito' form, and that this 'lost race' was later forced out of its homeland on the continent of Pan (itself 'lost' in a major flood in early historic times) and was in due course marginalised by its taller offshoots, who came to misperceive their predecessors as supernatural beings (fairies, leprechauns, etc.).

Overall, her use of linguistic material in this context serves only to suggest her own lack of competence in the relevant aspects of the discipline;

Martinez attempts to support this position with data drawn from various disciplines (archaeology, ethnology, etc.), but there is an especially heavy focus upon comparative linguistics; she traces many key features of known languages to an ancestral language 'Panic' used by the pygmies. Like most amateurs advancing such proposals, Martinez proceeds by equating unsystematically and superficially similar words (often very short words, which makes chance similarity especially likely) and (also very short) word-parts (morphemes or putative morphemes, syllables, etc.) from a wide range of languages which are normally considered not to be 'genetically' related (except perhaps in 'deep' pre-history) and to have had no influential contact with each other. See

my earlier pieces and now Chapters 1 and 2 of my book on the robust objections to such methods.

Martinez's academic background (which is 'upfront'; unlike most legitimate scholars, she advertises her PhD on the cover of her book) may mislead some readers not versed in linguistics into taking her linguistic material seriously. However, whatever may be said for the rest of her material – and this too contains some surprising oddities, for instance the worse-than-dated use of the word *Aryan* as an ethnic term – Martinez's linguistic equations, specifically, **cannot** be taken seriously. Examples of these equations include: the derivation of very many sequences in many languages including *-in-* from a Panic word *ihin* (referring to the pygmies themselves); similar derivations involving *ong/ang* ('light from above'), *su* ('spirit'), *ba* ('small'), etc.; and the proposing of novel Panic-based etymologies for familiar words with very well-established etymologies, such as the Spanish word *pan* ('bread') with its very clear Latin etymology; etc., etc.

Martinez also makes various errors regarding specific linguistic forms and their meanings. Overall, her use of linguistic material in this context serves only to suggest her own lack of competence in the relevant aspects of the discipline; and, in so far as her thesis depends upon linguistic evidence, it does not hold up at all.

Response to Ray Ward's review of *Strange Linguistics*, *Skeptical Intelligencer* 16 (4), (2013), pp. 13-15.

Mark Newbrook

I am grateful to Ray for his enthusiastic and very largely positive review of a book which (for all my efforts) might well appear *prima facie* daunting to non-specialists.

Most of Ray's comments are transparently accurate and fair, and I thank him for his corrections of points of detail. However, I would suggest that his identification of the Kensington Stone as 'indubitably' faked is over-confident (some highly-qualified commentators have accepted it as probably genuine); ditto his unqualified acceptance of the alleged 'demolition' of claims regarding the alleged ability of some animals to learn (aspects of) human languages by the Chomskyan scholar Pinker, and his blanket description of language reform schemes as 'hopeless'. And Ray appears to construe the scope of linguistics rather too narrowly where he suggests that some of the topics I discuss, such as numerology, are not specifically linguistic; the highly

relevant issue of the membership and conventional ordering of an alphabet is definitely a matter for linguists.

Linguists disagree with Ray's Queen's English Society less than he may perhaps imagine. Some 'gung-ho' sociolinguists do at times appear too fiercely anti-prescriptivist; but responsible linguists acknowledge that languages used as English is used need standard varieties (spoken and written) and that these have to be taught in schools and imposed in some domains. But this does not have to involve the denigration of the non-standard usage of a majority of native speakers. And, while there is merit in having a standard variety, many of the features which distinguish standard English from non-standard varieties do indeed appear arbitrary. The particular forms which by historical accident have come to be regarded as standard today are not typically superior in any way – except, in formal domains, where some (typically standard) forms are

genuinely preferable because they are more precise.

I assure Ray and other readers that there is a plethora of topics which I was unable to cover in my book. If the market is favourable, there is indeed ample scope for a second volume or a much-enlarged second edition.

I apologise for the absence of an index, which was not within the budget of the specialist publisher (otherwise very accommodating). If a second edition appears, I will seek to remedy this omission, especially if the book is bought by a larger publisher. The referencing format was adopted at the insistence of an earlier would-be publisher who then withdrew at the eleventh hour; after struggling for years to bring the book out, I was simply unable to find the time/energy to re-cast the entire 140-page section and the very many in-text references as I would have preferred. The relatively small print-size was selected so as not to force publication costs even higher.

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Shooting Bigfoot, BBC4, 24 March 2014, produced and directed by Morgan Matthews.

Ray Ward

This was one of the strangest and saddest programmes I have ever seen. Matthews obviously doesn't believe in Bigfoot, and gave us a portrait of very touchy, aggressive, obsessive men for whom the "hunt for Bigfoot" filled a void in their lives. One had hundreds of photos, none showing the kind of clear image that one would think would not be hard to get if such a large creature really existed in significant numbers. Another said he had been in "this industry" for 40 years, surely more than long enough either to establish Bigfoot's existence or conclude that the hunt is a waste of time. It began with a hoax: a Bigfoot

costume filled with dead animals, and a sad character who said he was the hoax victim, though the hoaxers said he approached them. There was much blundering around in woods, and a wonderfully incompetent episode with a man who said he had encountered Bigfoot but didn't want his name given. His face was hidden or blurred, a false name was agreed on, one of the hunters began to ask him about his claimed experience - and immediately used his real name! The hunter asked for the sequence to be re-taken, but the original was left in the film. One of the hunters was truly frightening: big, unstable, appallingly aggressive, gun-

toting, and one of those sad people who apparently are incapable of speech without inserting an obscenity (the same one, in various forms), apparently at random, every few words. Another frequently fell out with the film-maker, asking him to stop filming, saying he didn't want to continue, that some things should not be filmed (for no apparent reason), etc. It was the old story, so often seen with regard to claims of ghosts, UFOs, the Loch Ness Monster, paranormal powers etc.: if these things were real providing evidence would be easy, but somehow it is never forthcoming in any concrete, indisputable form.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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.

Denkfest 2014

September 11-14
Zurich, Switzerland
Core topics: Medicine & methods,
evolution, humanism in the 21st
century. Talks in English and German
with simultaneous translation. See:
<http://www.denkfest.ch/>
[https://www.facebook.com/denkfest/in
fo](https://www.facebook.com/denkfest/info)

The 16th European Skeptics Congress

This will take place in London in 2015
and will be hosted by ASKE. Related
organisations will also be involved.
Further details will be announced later
but keep an eye on the congress
website:
<http://euroscepticscon.org/>

OF INTEREST

SCEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

It's difficult to keep up with
developments and activities that this
sterling organisation has been engaging
in this year. Set aside plenty of time
and then go the website at:

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

Ian Harris: Critical & Thinking

From Al Silverton, Los Angeles

'I represent comedian Ian Harris.
He is currently on tour promoting his
upcoming hour TV special Ian Harris:
Critical & Thinking; a 70 minute cable
TV special promoting skepticism, non-
belief and critical thinking. I would
like to get him considered for your
upcoming conference/conventions. Ian
has performed at the CFI Summit in
Tacoma 2013, The 2013AHA National
Conference in San Diego, 2012 Ascent
of Atheism Denver and many others.
Ian has performed for SSA fund
raisers, Atheists United and has hosted
Sunday Assembly (with another
Sunday Assembly in April). Ian is the
one of the fastest rising comedy stars

and one of the fastest rising secular and
skeptical performer/speakers. Here is a
little more about him and his show.

'Ian Harris: Critical & Thinking is
the incredibly smart and irreverent new
comedy special from the brilliantly
skeptical mind of Ian Harris. Armed
with a wide array of characters, razor
like wit and critical thinking skills, Ian
skewers commonly held beliefs, taking
aim at such topics as Religion, Ghosts,
The Paranormal, Comforting Notions,
Astrology, Pop-Mysticism, Alternative
Medicine, Racism and Apocalyptic
Claims. It is easy to see why Ian
immediately elicits comparisons to
George Carlin and Bill Maher.'

Email:

al_silverton@2toneproductions.com

Promo:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRd
gXc42IjM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRdgXc42IjM)

EPK:

[http://2toneproductions.com/Critical&
ThinkingEPK.pdf](http://2toneproductions.com/Critical&ThinkingEPK.pdf)

Another skeptical website

Skeptical essays and reviews by ASKE
member 'Swiftsure' at:
[https://www.badthinking.wordpress.co
m/](https://www.badthinking.wordpress.com/)

Rupert Sheldrake

On April 2, 2013, TED.com finalised
their decision to ban Rupert Sheldrake,
PhD's TEDxWhitechapel talk on 'The
Science Delusion' from their main
database of searchable talks. Here is a
message from Dr David Barrett (via
Chris French):

'I fully support the general aims of
TED, but they are wrong to silence
speakers whose ideas are challenging
to the scientific orthodoxy. I've heard
longer versions of Dr Rupert
Sheldrake's TED talk on the Science
Delusion three times (twice at
Goldsmiths, once at the London
Fortean Society), and have heard him
challenged on his talk in Q&A sessions
and in personal conversation, and have
heard him defend his stance. He may
be right or he may be wrong on each of
the ten main points he makes; that is
far less important than the fact that he
is asking awkward questions. He has
said that he would be happy to be
shown to be wrong, to be given
answers to his questions; that is a
scientific attitude. The people who run
TED, who conveniently hide behind
anonymity, are stifling debate, they are

saying which questions it is permitted to ask and which it is not; that is not being scientific. It is censorship. Whether you are a scientist or not, I would urge any of my friends with academic qualifications to take a stand for freedom of speech in academic debate, by signing this petition to the organisers of TED'. See:

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

A video of Dr Shel Drake's talk can be viewed at the above website, and two talks he gave at APRU can be viewed at:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/lectures/>

SCIENTIFIC TOPICS

Multiverse theories

Remarks in the media by those committed the idea of a God creator frequently assume that the idea of multiple universes is just an invention of scientists to account for the observation that for life to be able to exist in any universe, that universe's physical properties must be finely tuned to an astonishingly precise degree. If there is a huge or infinite number of universes some, including ours, will have these properties. But in fact, multiple or parallel universes are *predictions* of well-developed scientific theories. See:

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/2014/02/04/are-parallel-universes-unscientific-nonsense-insider-tips-for-criticizing-the-multiverse/>

Statistics

'Scientists have found the real cause of autism. Bad news for organic farmers' (an example of the rule: correlation does not prove causation).

<https://twitter.com/bengoldacre/status/420164907267788800>

Statistical significance

P values, the 'gold standard' of statistical validity, are not as reliable as many scientists assume.

<http://www.nature.com/news/scientific-method-statistical-errors-1.14700>

MEDICINE (GENERAL)

The Nightingale Collaboration

Please visit the Nightingale Collaboration website for an update on the numerous successful complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), and other regulators.

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/>

Modern medicine

All seems not to be well with modern mainstream medicine. But at least its severest and most informed critics come from within (cf. Ben Goldacre and contrast alternative medicine). See for example:

(i) 'Spurious syndromes: we create disease by giving every illness a name' at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g1828>

(ii) 'The medical miracles delusion' at:

<http://jrs.sagepub.com/content/107/3/92.full>

(iii) 'The billion prescriptions a year in England in 2012, up 66% in one decade, do not reflect a true increased burden of illness nor an ageing population, just polypharmacy supposedly based on evidence. The drug industry's corporate mission is to make us all sick however well we feel. As for Evidence Based Medicine screening programmes, these are the combine harvester of wellbeing, producing bails of overdiagnosis and misery ...' See:

<http://www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.g22?etoc>

(iv) 'Europe faces up to big pharma over clinical data', at

[http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25196-europe-faces-up-to-big-pharma-over-clinical-](http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25196-europe-faces-up-to-big-pharma-over-clinical)

[data.html#.Ux8wdSw9scw.gmail](http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25196-europe-faces-up-to-big-pharma-over-clinical-data.html#.Ux8wdSw9scw.gmail)

Knee surgery may be ineffective

About 700,000 people may be getting knee surgery each year that doesn't work as well as they had hoped, new

research suggests. In fact, it may be no better than a sham procedure. The surgery is an arthroscopic procedure called a partial meniscectomy.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/commo-n-arthroscopic-knee-surgery-not-effective-no-better-than-sham-researchers-say/>

Interestingly, in September 2008 we heard that 'An operation offered to ease the symptoms of osteoarthritis makes no difference, say Canadian doctors. Patients given knee arthroscopy showed no improvement beyond that provided by physiotherapy and painkillers. See:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7607891.stm>

Doctors cause rise in blood pressure

'Next time you visit your GP to have your blood pressure (BP) checked, you may want to ask the nurse to do it, say researchers who have found that doctors routinely record higher levels. In some cases, the hike in BP reading was enough to tip a patient over the threshold for needing treatment.'

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-26731731>

Acupuncture

A new study published online in the journal *Cancer* suggests that any relief acupuncture brings may be the result of a placebo effect.

<http://www.sfgate.com/technology/businessinsider/article/New-Study-Exposes-Acupuncture-As-Pseudoscience-5094637.php?forceWeb=1>

Vitamin supplements

Selenium, Vitamin E supplements may double prostate cancer risk.

<http://www.livescience.com/43585-supplements-may-double-prostate-cancer-risk.html>

Herbal remedies

A couple whose desperation for a baby led them into the arms of cruel fraudsters, whose bogus herbal treatments convinced them that their wish had finally been granted, have been cleared of involvement in

immigration fraud by a High Court judge:

<http://www.legalrss.co.uk/cbg/desperate-couple-duped-in-baby-fraud>

Charles the Daft

He's at it again. Prince Charles continues to lobby for the alternative medicine industry.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/laura-donnely/10576548/Prince-Charles-makes-plea-on-alternative-medicine.html>

See also 'Freedom'.

Ayurvedic medicine

'A meeting of Ayurvedic interests took place at the UK Houses of Parliament on 16th January, attended by Justice Minister Simon Hughes MP.....Mr Hughes expressed optimism over the possibility of a working regulatory regime for herbalists being set up in the current Parliamentary term:

<http://anh-europe.org/news/ayurveda-group-receives-reassurances-from-uk-government>

Homeopathy (or not)

Clarrisa Tan in the *Spectator* describes her taste (yes) of homeopathic medicine in Florence.

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/notebook/9121051/clarissa-tans-notebook-is-florence-better-in-fog/>

This stirred ASKE member Pete Lucey to pen the following (published) letter:

'I enjoyed Clarrisa Tan's adventures in Italian alternative medicine (*Spectator*, 25/1/14); the whole account reminded me gloriously of "Three Men in Boat". But if she could smell the petrol in her potion, homeopathic it was not. Did she record the dilution factor? Homeopathy, one of the oldest and most widespread quack remedies, hides its ludicrous levels of dilution under a code, that is, "C", for 1 in a hundred. Each further "C" is another 1-in-a-hundred dilution, so 6C, a common dilution factor for homeopathic remedies, is 1 in a trillion, or (deep breath!) 1 ten-thousandth of 1 millionth of 1 percent: arguably not one molecule of the original substance is in the final remedy. Practically indistinguishable

from plain water, and surely not scented?'

Homeopathy product recalled

A company making homeopathic remedies in the US has had to recall more than 50 different products from across its range after they were found to contain actual medicine.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/homeopathy-product-recalled-over-fears-it-may-contain-actual-medicine-9217206.html>

Organic food

A report due for publication in the *British Journal of Cancer* has concluded that women who always or mostly eat organic foods are no less likely to develop cancer than women who eat a more conventional diet.

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/mar/28/women-organic-foods-develop-cancer>

PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Sleep paralysis

Devil in the Room is, a short animated film about sleep paralysis by Carla MacKinnon, which was awarded the Best Documentary award at the CineGlobe Festival at CERN earlier this week. The project was supported by the Wellcome Trust and was part of the Sleep Paralysis Project:

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

You can watch the film here:

<http://vimeo.com/68638523>

False Memory

The Psychologist devoted their centre spread in April to the False Memory Archive:

<http://issuu.com/thepsychologist/docs/psy0414/26>

This is a collaboration between artist Alasdair Hopwood, Chris French, and a host of other memory researchers:

<http://www.falsememoryarchive.com>

Ritual satanic abuse

The *Times* reported on 26.3.14 that the family of Carole Myers, who died in 2005 and who, during therapy, falsely

claimed that her parents were Satanists, has won the right to seek a new inquest into her death. No report of this appears to be accessible on the internet at present but an account of this terrible case can be read at:

www.justiceforcarol.com/

See also under 'Religion'.

Dissociative identity disorder

'A 23-year-old woman claims she has 15 personalities - and must buy Christmas presents for all of them. Kimi Sands suffers from a rare condition called Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), which results in her different personalities taking control of her body at any given time. She has spent hundreds of pounds buying gifts for all 15 of her personas, which include Japanese chef Satou, 22, exercise-addict Fiona, 17, four-year-old twins Jack and Safyer (*that's enough personalities - Ed.*).

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2526341/I-buy-presents-15-personalities-Woman-23-splashes-Christmas-gifts-delight-different-characters-control-body.html>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2526341/I-buy-presents-15-personalities-Woman-23-splashes-Christmas-gifts-delight-different-characters-control-body.html>

Lie detection

'Humans are very poor lie detectors, performing at only about 54 percent accuracy in traditional lie detection tasks'. But unconscious processes may be more effective than conscious ones.

<http://psychcentral.com/news/2014/03/27/instinctual-detection-of-deceit-better-than-conscious-efforts/67694.html>

<http://psychcentral.com/news/2014/03/27/instinctual-detection-of-deceit-better-than-conscious-efforts/67694.html>

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is 'a meaningless label' claim experts in a controversial new book:

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/news/DyslexiaDebateResearchBriefing.pdf>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/dyslexia-a-meaningless-label-claim-experts-in-controversial-new-book-9152801.html>

Also: 'Dyslexia is a term that confuses, rather than clarifies, and should be discontinued. Universities, of all institutions, should not perpetuate the use of a term that lacks scientific credibility'. See:

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/is-it-time-to-rethink-dyslexia/2011751.article>

RELIGION

Book on the Soul

Anaesthetist Gerald Woerlee has written an authoritative book entitled *Illusory Souls* which examines ‘the reality of a human soul, provably answering questions such as: Do we have souls? Is there an afterlife? Are there hamsters in heaven? Do near-death experiences, and out-of-body experiences reveal anything about the true nature of the soul?’ See:

www.illusorysouls.net

and

<http://anesthesiaweb.org/illusory-souls.php>

Creationism

A study by academics at the University of York claims creationism should be tackled by science teachers in order to engage their religious pupils.

<http://www.christianvoice.org.uk/index.php/tag/times-educational-supplement/>

The cursing of Ariel Sharon

‘Ariel Sharon was dead for less than four hours on Saturday when Shabbat ended and the religious social network began buzzing with omens. One of the most popular celestial theories making the rounds was the Hebrew date on which the former prime minister had returned his soul to his maker - the tenth of Shvat 5774. Scrabbling to find its meaning, they quickly came up with one - it was exactly ten years to the day that Sharon had first disclosed his plan to ‘disengage’ from Gaza, over a lavish breakfast in the prime minister’s residence with Haaretz’s Yoel Marcus.’

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.568376>

Monks called in to lift ‘curse’

Chinese billionaire Lam Kok’s multi-millionaire widow, Liu Xiangyun, has hired 20 Buddhist monks to lift what she believes is a ‘curse’ on their 16th century Bordeaux château in Fronsac. Lam Kok was the third successive owner of the Bordeaux château to have died in an air crash.

Ritual satanic abuse (again)

An interesting retrospective article and video on the McMartin Preschool satanic abuse case appear in the New York Times (including comments by Debbie Nathan):

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/us/the-trial-that-unleashed-hysteria-over-child-abuse.html?hp>

God moves in a mysterious way

Two white doves that were released as a peace gesture by children standing alongside Pope Francis were attacked by other birds. See:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/26/pope-doves-attacked-by-crow-seagull-st-peters-square?CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2>

‘They will pick up snakes with their hands..’. A snake-handling pastor died after refusing treatment for a bite. See:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/17/kentucky-snake-handling-pastor-dies-snakebite->

A woman has found the image of Jesus on her bruised toe (*can’t you think of a pun here?* – Ed.). See:

<http://metro.co.uk/2014/01/31/woman-finds-image-of-jesus-in-her-toe-bruise-4286083?ITO=SendToAFriend>

CRYPTOZOLOGY, ETC.

Lake monster

‘Bownessie’, the monster of Lake Windemere, has been sighted again – and photographed.

<http://hayleyisaghost.co.uk/give-us-a-wave-bownessie/>

The Bristol Crocodile

Several sightings of a crocodile (or alligator) have been reported in rivers around the Bristol area. One has been filmed on the river Avon (see link below) and, according to the *Bristol Post* ‘is not dissimilar to a log’ (*maybe it is a log* – Ed.).

<http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/Bristol-beast-Crocodile-captured-camera-ndash-al/story-20601058-detail/story.html>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Flight MH370

Rob Brotherton has published an article on the psychology of belief in conspiracy theories with reference to the missing flight MH370 in *New Scientist*:

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25260-flight-mh370-the-allure-of-the-conspiracy-theory.html#.UzL6ms4YvIw>

Medical conspiracy theories

Nearly half of Americans believe in at least one medical conspiracy theory, a survey finds. The study was published by *JAMA Internal Medicine*. Source:

<http://www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.g2277>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Magnetic man

An ex-Soviet kick-boxing coach from Georgia has set a new record, using his rather rare talent, the ability to attract metal to his body. See:

<http://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-12-29/georgia-magnetic-man-sets-new-spoon-record/>

Conjurer ‘asked to find missing airliner’

Uri Geller claims that he has been asked to help find Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. For one grown-up take on this see:

http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/josephlaycock/7706/why_the_disappeared_malaysian_airliner_brings_out_the_paranormal/

Electronic voice phenomenon

Chris French has recently recorded an interview with Max Sanderson on the so-called ‘Electronic Voice Phenomenon’ (EVP) - the idea that you can record spirit voices on ordinary recording devices. Max has edited his contribution into an excellent little podcast:

<http://humaniapodcast.wordpress.com/2014/03/09/hearing-voices/>

Vampires

The April issue of *The Psychologist* carries a review by Deborah Bowden

of a one-day symposium on vampires at Goldsmiths College, London, jointly organised by the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena and the APRU:

<http://issuu.com/thepsychologist/docs/p sy0414/8>

FREEDOM

**KEEP LIBEL LAWS
OUT OF SCIENCE**

The Defamation Act

England and Wales now have the new libel law that thousands of individuals have campaigned for for nearly five years. The Defamation Act came into force on 1st January 2014. See

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/367/defamation-act-2013-has-come-into-force#sthash.RNIUwpzE.dpuf>

Charles the Daft (again)

Three senior judges have ruled that Dominic Grieve, the attorney general,

acted unlawfully when he blocked the publication of letters written by Prince Charles to government ministers. The ruling paves the way for the release of the letters, which reveal how the prince lobbied government ministers to change official policies.

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/mar/12/attorney-general-unlawful-prince-charles-letters>

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>

For videos of some of the previous talks visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/lectures/>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>
<https://twitter.com/SITP?refsrc=email>

Choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events.

LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

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

The society meets on the last Thursday of each month, except July and December, at The Bell, 50 Middlesex Street, London E1 7EX.

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

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

CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

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

BRITISH MATHEMATICAL COLLOQUIUM

The Magic of Martin Gardner

'As part of the 2014 British Mathematical Colloquium, join Professor Persi Diaconis, mathematician and former professional magician to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Martin Gardner, with a lecture on the life, work and magic of this famous populariser of mathematics and science.'

Venue:

Great Hall, the People's Palace, Queen Mary University of London
Mile End Road
London E1 4NS

Date and time:

Monday, 7 April 2014 from 18:30 to 19:30

For information:

<http://bit.ly/1cHhc7b>

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

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