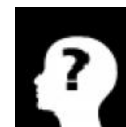


THE SKEPTICAL *INTELLIGENCER*



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

Edited by Michael Heap

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

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Plans for the 16th European Skeptics Congress are well under way, jointly organised by ASKE and the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths College London, the venue of the congress. Put the dates in your diary now: Friday September 11th to Sunday September 13th 2015. The congress website is below and a ‘call for participants’ will appear any time.

<http://euroscepticscon.org/>

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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Finally, authors may use 'sceptic' or 'skeptic' (and their derivatives) according to their preference.

For further information contact the Editor Michael Heap at m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk.

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.

REGULAR FEATURES

FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

The politics of pollution

'Bollocks'

(Tweet by Mayor of London Boris Johnson in response to a scientific investigation showing that levels of nitrogen dioxide pollution in Oxford Street are the highest in the world.)

'We have got to get rid of all this green crap.'

(Statement attributed to UK Prime Minister David Cameron concerning the problem of high energy bills.)

When I was a little boy, living in a small industrial town in the Pennines, I would look up at the surrounding hills and see them as blue. Now they appear in glorious green and have done so for many years. But back then there was so much smoke in the air from factories and domestic chimneys that the hills took on a bluey-grey hue when viewed from the valley below.

Politicians in this country only became seriously committed to improving air quality in the 1950s when the nation's capital (and other cities) suffered sustained periods of being enveloped in smog so dense that at times visibility was officially recorded as nil. From December 1952 to March 1953 in Greater London 12,000 more residents than usual died owing to smoke and coal fumes which were unable to disperse upwards through the heavier colder air. Despite this, politicians and other officials were reluctant to accept that so many people could die simply from breathing dirty air (specifically sulphur dioxide), or that if they were dying, anything could be done about it, at least without great economic cost. In response to a parliamentary question in which it was pointed out (strictly speaking not quite accurately) that in the previous month more people had expired from breathing the polluted air of London than had been killed on the nation's

roads the previous year, the then Minister of Housing Harold Macmillan replied, 'Members can't blame my colleagues for the weather' and rejected calls for legislation. What he did do is revealed in a confidential memo uncovered in the 1990s stating:

Today everybody expects the government to solve every problem. It is a symptom of the welfare state. For some reason or another 'smog' has captured the imagination of the press and people.....Ridiculous as it seems I suggest we form a committee. We cannot do very much, but we can seem to be very busy and that is half the battle nowadays.

And later:

There are some small things which we can do. We can gain popularity by them. The masks etc.

He then proceeded to ask the NHS to provide for the distribution of 3 million useless face masks.

It was eventually established that air pollution cost the country hundreds of millions of pounds a year and it was comparatively cheap to do something about it.

In fact it was eventually established that air pollution cost the country hundreds of millions of pounds a year and it was comparatively cheap to do something about it. The Conservative MP Mr (later Sir) Gerald Nabarro (he with the handlebar moustache) put down a private member's bill which led to the Clean Air Act of 1956.

But now it seems that the air we breathe in our cities is polluted by another deadly gas: nitrogen dioxide from vehicle emissions. Researchers from Kings College London set up a monitoring station on Oxford Street

which found a peak level of nitrogen dioxide at 463mg³, more than 11 times higher than the European Union's safe limit of 40mg³. The monitoring station also found that average levels of nitrogen dioxide were 135mg³ – almost four times the EU limit. But Mr Johnson is having none of this (*see note 1*).

Pollution due to vehicle emissions is a proven and serious public health hazard and the levels that we are having to endure are scandalous. Yet, as with pollution from the burning of coal in the 1950s, there seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge the scale of the problem or a fatalistic attitude that there is nothing we can do about it. Some writers have suggested this is because this form of pollution is invisible and its effects are not immediate, but I'm not so sure about this.

My wife and I live close to two primary schools and during term time many of the parents deliver and collect their children in their huge status-symbol cars. At such times the surrounding roads are congested with these parked vehicles and the air that the children are breathing must be thick with exhaust fumes. Yet I see some parents leaving their engines running while they sort out their children, gossip with other parents, use their mobile phones, and so on. Now, a while ago there was a proposal to erect a mobile phone mast close to one of the schools. The radiation from mobile phone masts is invisible and undetectable by the human senses AND there is no reason why it should pose a health risk AND, unlike car emissions, there is no good evidence that it does so. Yet immediately, posters appeared on trees, lampposts, etc. decrying the proposal and warning parents that the safety of the masts for children's health had yet to be proven

(admittedly this objection was given lower priority than the effect on house prices). So in this case invisibility and undetectability clearly did not militate against any concern about the effects of a supposed pollutant.

Maybe what does dilute concern is when the pollutant is a product of our own valued possessions or activities. Or perhaps, if we are like Messrs Johnson, Cameron and Macmillan, we want to protect our political reputation.

Note

1. Ironically, a new high tech London bus, trumpeted by Mr Johnson as 'the cleanest and greenest bus of its type' and dubbed 'the Boris bus', has just

been found to be no more economical on fuel than other modern hybrid buses costing £40,000 less (see:

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/environment/article4224019>).

References

Boris Johnson: 'bollocks' to say Oxford Street has world's worst pollution.

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/18/boris-johnson-bollocks-oxford-street-worlds-worst-pollution>

'When smoke ran like water: Tales of environmental deception and the battle against pollution' by Devra Davis, pages 44-46.

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=MyZo7EhN8-MC&printsec=frontcover&dq=isbn:0465015220&hl=en&sa=X&ei=8xkfVLS-PCKid7gbOuIG4Cw&ved=0CCIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>
'Mobile phones and cancer'.
<http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/healthyliving/cancercontroversies/mobilephones/mobile-phones-and-cancer>

LOGIC AND INTUITION

How much has Albert lost?

I was down at the 'Rose & Crown' the other night, eavesdropping on a heated discussion between Albert, the owner of the sweetshop across the road, and a group of his friends. Apparently, the day before, a stranger had come into his shop to spend £6 on some chocolate and wanted to pay with a £10 note. Having no change for this, Albert popped to the florist's next door and swapped the note for £10 in coins. He returned and gave the customer his £4 change. Later that day the florist came in with the note and said that she had

discovered it to be a forgery. So Albert was obliged to exchange it for an authentic £10 note.

'I can't afford to be £10 out of pocket!' lamented Albert to his sympathetic audience.

'More than that', said his friend Joyce. 'You also gave £4 in change to the customer. That makes a loss of £14'.

'It gets worse', said Fred, Joyce's husband. 'You're also down on some chocolate for which you would otherwise now get £6. That makes a loss of £20!'

'Not quite', chipped in Joe, another of Albert's friends. If you bought the chocolate at a wholesale price of say £4, then you've only lost £18'.

'That's not quite right either', interjected Doris, the landlady as she collected the empty glasses. 'You've lost the *profit* on the chocolate – only £2. That makes a loss of £16 altogether'.

'A double brandy when you're ready, Doris!' intoned a weary Albert.

So exactly how much did Albert lose on this unfortunate transaction?

Answer on page 14

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

Two women with cancer

A poignant article appeared in the *Independent on Sunday* on 28.9.14 about two sisters-in-law, Debora Shipley and Gill Edwards, both of whom suffered from cancer. Over the past 14 years Mrs Woods has been diagnosed successively with tumours in her breast, bones and brain but she has survived, thanks to treatment by medical specialists at Royal Marsden Hospital. In 2009, Ms Edwards was diagnosed with breast cancer; a clinical

psychologist by profession, through her writing and teaching she vigorously promoted an alternative approach to conventional medical practice called 'conscious medicine':

Conscious medicine recognises that the bodymind is an undivided whole. It sees us as conscious energy systems. And it recognises that our body is always our friend, and any symptom or dis-ease is a meaningful wake-up call. It is a call from our future self: 'Come hither! Come

towards me!' It helps us see where we are stuck in old patterns or negative habits of thought, where we have put our dreams aside out of fear or guilt, or where we are not loving and honouring ourselves. And as we pay attention to its messages, and begin to transform ourselves and allow energy to flow freely again, not only does the body naturally heal; the disease also becomes a doorway to a new life. Every illness is a gift. The more serious the disease, the

greater the opportunity for transformation. (And sometimes that transformation takes the form of death - which is not a failure or a tragedy. It is simply a choice to evolve in that direction.) (Note 1)

Many people will be appalled to read these kinds of ideas, or at best consider them to be luxury that affluent westerners might happily entertain, but hardly a message to inflict on others – babies and children or people in the developing countries who are dying of malaria, AIDS or the ebola virus to name but three killer diseases. But Ms Edwards was someone who was likewise appalled by the ‘slash, poison and burn’ methods of conventional medicine. Accordingly, when her cancer was diagnosed, she rejected orthodox treatment and opted for alternative, ‘holistic’ methods including the Gerson diet and herbal medicine. A few months later the lump on her breast had gone and, not unreasonably she announced that this was testimony to the philosophy of conscious medicine. Unfortunately, however, her cancer returned; a lump appeared on her left breast above her heart. Again she rejected orthodox medicine, believing that her cancer ‘was the result of a traumatic love affair’. Sadly, for her family, including her children, she died in 2011.

The news of Ms Edwards’ death prompted hundreds of comments on her website from people from all over the world, describing how she had helped them through her writing and teaching. According to Mr Woods, ‘She was a successful and popular

author who touched many people’s lives very positively’.

It would be easy to say how better it would have been if only Ms Edwards had believed that the alternative philosophy that she espoused did not reject outright conventional treatment. But often it’s a mistake to think that you can change just one thing about a person and leave everything else the same, in this case her capacity to bring hope and comfort to others.

The story of the two women will be featured on Channel 4 on 16.10.14 in *Cancer on Trial*.

Note

1. <http://www.isbourne.org/news/92-gill-edwards-extolling-the-new-consciois-medicine>

More nonsense about homeopathy

There’s been a bit of an uproar over the decision by the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care (PSA) to give accreditation to the Society of Homeopaths’ voluntary register under a new scheme set up by the Department of Health (note 1). According to the PSA’s website:

Practitioners on the register will be able to display the Accredited Voluntary Register (AVR) quality mark, a sign that they belong to a register which meets the Professional Standards Authority’s robust standards.

The PSA insists that it has no opinion on whether homeopathic treatment is effective. ‘It’s not saying anything about homeopathy’, said Harry Cayton, chief executive of the authority. ‘It’s accrediting the register,

not the therapy ... What we’re saying is, if you choose homeopathy, you probably want to have a homeopath who is competent within the rules of homeopathy’. Mr Cayton, has acknowledged that many medical professionals believed that homeopathy is useless but ‘It’s a matter of opinion. The people who use homeopathy have an opinion’.

If a homeopath gave me arnica when he should have prescribed witch hazel it wouldn’t matter.

This is a farce. The competence of any medical practitioner must be judged by whether he or she is capable of correctly diagnosing the patient’s illness and providing the right medicine. If my doctor treats an illness I have with hypertensive medication when she should have prescribed antibiotics, then she has failed to act in a competent manner, as a result of which my health may suffer. If a homeopath gave me arnica when he should have prescribed witch hazel it wouldn’t matter – the medicines are identical. All he has done is put a different label on the bottle.

Note

1. <http://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/footer-pages/news-and-media/latest-news/news-article?id=748c599e-2ce2-6f4b-9ceb-ff0000b2236b>

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

More from Menzies

Previously in this forum I have discussed the ideas of Gavin Menzies, who explains many alleged historical anomalies in terms of Chinese influence around the world in late

medieval times. In his 2013 book *Who Discovered America?* (written with Ian Hudson), Menzies has now reformulated the ‘pre-colonial’ history of the Americas, specifically, in these same terms. Once again he invokes linguistic evidence alongside material

from other disciplines, identifying superficially similar words as shared between Chinese and far-flung languages and attributing these cases to the influence of the globe-trotting Chinese.

And once again Menzies' proposals fall foul of the familiar objections. He has finally deigned to engage in exchanges with scholarly critics, notably some from Singapore (pp. 174-175, etc.); but there is little or no evidence here that he has paid any serious attention to his **linguist** critics (such as me). He simply proceeds as he did in earlier books: he equates a 'Chinese' word for 'mist' (What '**dialect**' of Chinese? What exact word-form?) with the country-name *Peru* (p. 139); he again lists a succession of other South American place-names which he glibly equates with (mostly unspecified) Chinese words of approximately similar form, in places going so far as to adduce (conveniently now vanished) mutual intelligibility between Chinese and some local languages (pp. 35, 143-146, 150-151, 175-176); in the same vein he finds Chinese influence in Cherokee (p. 204), written Mi'kmaq (pp. 212, 221), etc.; he repeats his claims (surely only barely relevant at best) about links between Zuni and **Japanese** (pp. 233-234; drawn originally from Nancy Yaw Davis) and between Apache and **Tatar** (pp. 234-235; drawn from non-linguistic sources a century and more old); etc. Whatever may be the strengths of Menzies' material in other respects, his linguistic 'evidence' is still of no account.

It should also be noted that Menzies (see *The Lost Empire of Atlantis*, 2011, especially pp. 314-321) has endorsed the inadequately supported epigraphic claims of Minas Tsikritsis. Tsikritsis (see for instance <http://www.anistor.gr/english/enback/v014.htm>) believes that he has deciphered the Cretan Linear A script as representing an early form of Greek, regards fifteen of the symbols on the dreaded Phaistos Disk as shared with Linear B (which **does** represent Greek), and 'deciphers' part of the Disk text too as Greek. (For skeptical comment, see pp. 318-319 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*, or my review of Menzies' book in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 14 (2011), pp. 27-28, re-

published at <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>.)

Mormon names, words and texts

Most readers will be familiar (in general terms) with the supposedly divinely-channelled *Book of Mormon* and other texts promoting the eccentric part-Christian world view of the Church of Latter Day Saints. The Saints hold that two waves of Israelites settled the New World in ancient times. There is, of course, no worthwhile archaeological or other historical evidence to support this view; only historians already committed to the LDS account have ever endorsed it.

The (Church of Latter Day) Saints hold that two waves of Israelites settled the New World in ancient times.

What is less familiar is the linguistic side of this issue. Firstly: most of the unfamiliar names of many of the characters introduced in the *Book* (one such name is *Coriatumr*) make no sense in Hebrew, or for that matter in any American language. Secondly: while some LDS sources argue for the presence of features of scripts used in ancient Israel in 'inscriptions' found in the Americas, and/or seek to relate known languages of the Americas to Hebrew, none of this material is at all convincing.

Some LDS sources also continue to promote the veracity of the otherwise unknown 'Reformed Egyptian' in their *Book of Abraham* and other texts associated with *The Pearl of Great Price*. When the early LDS leaders claimed that this was the language of the plates which an angel lent to them to be mystically translated, Egyptian had not yet been fully deciphered by Champollion and others, but nothing learned since that time has confirmed LDS ideas on this front. The small pieces of genuine Egyptian text presented in LDS sources were already known at the time and have subsequently been interpreted quite differently.

Misreading, misleading

Some non-linguists who begin to concern themselves with the subject-matter of the discipline understandably misunderstand some of what they read. For instance, Les Whale, a supporter of Ior Bock's extreme ideas about the languages of Finland, badly misinterpreted mainstream linguists' descriptions of Finnish as **synthetic**. In context, this word has a technical sense referring to the type of morphology (word-structure) displayed by Finnish (as contrasted with *analytic*, etc.). The everyday sense of the word, which would imply that Finnish was in some way artificially concocted, is not relevant here. However, Whale, unfamiliar with the terminology, took *synthetic* as having this latter meaning. He then came to the view that mainstream linguists using this term were actually endorsing Ior Bock's claim that Finnish was literally concocted in the distant past – thereby taking unwarranted comfort from their words.

Another non-mainstream author who adopts extreme views of this kind is Edo Nyland (*Linguistic Archaeology: An Introduction*; 2001). Nyland argues (unpersuasively) that almost all well-known languages were deliberately concocted out of Basque roots. But some commentators on material of this kind (for example reviewers on Amazon and others commenting on such reviews) confuse views such as these with more sober and more accurate mainstream views. One commentator on a review of Nyland noted correctly that Nyland identified Sanskrit as one of the many languages which he considered to have been invented; but then cited the occultist Alexandre St. Yves d'Alveydre as supporting this interpretation. In fact, d'Alveydre (although himself a 'fringe' thinker) was accurately describing Sanskrit merely as a specialised, mainly literary language developed on the basis of related spoken varieties for use in religious and other such texts; he was **not** suggesting, as Nyland does, that it was invented wholesale.

For skeptical comment on ideas of this kind, see Chapter 2 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.

Folk-linguistic bias

As I have observed before, many non-linguists (understandably but unwarrantedly) believe, or want to believe, that their own language is especially important. This ‘folk-linguistic’ viewpoint becomes a problem if they begin to study linguistics. Some of my first-year Singaporean students were proud speakers of Tamil (mostly Hindus, some Christians). Tamil is the most widely used member of the South Indian ‘Dravidian’ family, an official language in Tamil Nadu and in Singapore itself, and the vehicle of a highly respected literature dating back over 2,000 years. Owing to prolonged contact within India, Tamil and other Dravidian languages have come to share some linguistic features (pronunciation and vocabulary) with the unrelated ‘Indic’ languages of North India (Indo-European) – notably with Sanskrit, which is the classical language of that region and the main classical language of Hinduism. Although scholarly views on these matters vary, the earliest speakers of the Indic languages almost certainly arrived in India to find Dravidian already current there.

There are relatively few users of Indic languages in Singapore (Punjabi-speaking Sikhs form the largest group), and Sanskrit itself is not widely known there except among Hindu pandits.

It soon became clear to me that many ethnically South Indian people such as these students are determined to believe (whatever the evidence) that Tamil was the ‘older’ of these two languages (in fact, Dravidian is often believed to have been in India since the beginning of human language) – and indeed that any feature shared by Tamil and Sanskrit must have originated in Tamil. Even when a form is shared by Tamil, Sanskrit **and** other Indo-European languages such as Greek with which neither Tamil nor Sanskrit had any pre-modern contact, they are unwilling to accept the

obvious conclusion that it came into Tamil from Sanskrit/Indic (‘That is one way of looking at it’).

Many non-linguists (understandably but unwarrantedly) believe, or want to believe, that their own language is especially important.

Even those more advanced Singapore Indian students who had learned about the controversy surrounding the undeciphered Indus Valley Script (which was used in a very ancient civilisation in North India and may represent Indic, Dravidian or some other language family) would almost always be unshakable in their conviction that it must represent early Tamil or at any rate Dravidian. (I later met Indic-speakers who, despite lacking specialist knowledge, were just as confident that IVS represented early Sanskrit!) My Singaporeans were also unsettled when they learned that the earliest grammars of Tamil are clearly modelled on the very sophisticated and demonstrably older grammar of Sanskrit produced by the celebrated early pandit Panini (both languages have extensive and impressive indigenous grammatical traditions).

Little mysteries

Some very familiar facts about languages have (surprisingly) no known explanation. For example, no-one knows how the letter Y came to have its English name, which sounds as if it begins with W. (In most European languages, the letter is called ‘Greek I’.)

More riders to recent entries

Non-Standard Theories Involving the Ancient Egyptian Language (2014:1)

Another, particularly extreme theory, relating Egyptian to Welsh (!) as well as to Hebrew, is offered by Grant Berkley in *Moses In The Hieroglyphs* (2006).

More (partly justified) skepticism about the linguistic mainstream (2014:2)

The NP+VP analysis beloved of Chomskyan linguists is in fact much more traditional than Chomsky’s own radical image and politics would suggest; it goes back to the ancient grammarian Dionysius Thrax, and it appears in prescriptive and other conservative school grammar books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the name Subject-and-Predicate.

Greek words but not Greek, Latin words but not Latin (2014:2)

There are of course various other spoof texts parallel with *e sybille...* (see *Editor’s Note*); another well-known pseudo-Latin one begins *Caesar adsum jam (iam) forte* (‘Caesar had some jam for tea’). But there are also numerous cases where it is seriously claimed that passages are in languages other than those which they appear to be in. Over a century ago the ‘fringe’ author Augustus le Plongeon asserted that Jesus spoke Mayan on the Cross, not (somewhat odd) Aramaic/Hebrew. *lei lei lema sabakthanei*, the best-known version given in the Greek of *Matthew*, 27:46 (*Mark*, 15:34 provides an alternative version), is re-interpreted as *Hele, hele, lamah zabae ta ni* (translated as ‘now, now, I am fainting; darkness covers my face’). James Churchward later claimed that the Greek alphabet, as normally recited (Alpha, Beta, etc.), is really a poem in Mayan.

Another example: at many temples in Japan, there is a custom of choral chanting; the chants involve Japanese syllables (and can thus be written using the kana syllabic script) but are often meaningless. Where they do have a meaning, it is typically irrelevant and trite. Bruria Bergman claims, however, that one particular chant (at Herai/Shingo in northern Honshu, where the ‘Grave of Jesus’ is exhibited) is in fact in Hebrew, modified to fit Japanese phonology: she reads it as meaning ‘God gave birth to me as in (Parashat) Vayera, God gave birth to me as in (Parashat) Ha’azinu’. However, Bergman’s linguistics is amateurish. The text is (as

she admits) too short for a reliable re-interpretation, and in order to uphold her Hebrew reading she is obliged to deny (arbitrarily) the validity of current historical linguistic methodology and to adopt much looser criteria for cognatehood. Her reading can be made to seem plausible only by very special pleading. In twenty minutes I myself was able to devise a spoof Late-Latin reading which is closer to the Japanese phonetics than Bergman's Hebrew is, and indeed also fits the situation better: *Nenia(m) do erae, nenia(m) do Nazareno* = 'I offer a lament to the mistress [the Virgin Mary], I offer a lament to the Nazarene one [Jesus]'. A plausible source would be 'Dark Age' missionaries in Japan, given that some were active in coastal China. But the most **probable** conclusion is that this is a normal Japanese folk-chant with some sequences that display accidental, rather approximate similarities to Hebrew words.

More fun things!

It has been noted (thanks to Gary Goldberg for the reference) that one can tell chemists on the one hand from tradespeople on the other by asking them to pronounce the written word *unionized*. (Think about it!)

I was once at a conference where a distinguished-looking scholar presented a very professional talk about Old Persian (the language of Darius and Xerxes, written in 'cuneiform' script and deciphered in the nineteenth century by Henry Rawlinson and others). He illustrated his material with slides showing key inscriptions. Afterwards I asked him where he had learned to read Old Persian. 'Oh', he said, 'I can't read it; I've never done it! They say it's very hard!' He had relied throughout on translations by others, at times going through sentences giving word-by-word interpretations on this basis! He certainly deserved an award for nerve; but we wondered together if one day he would be caught out. On that occasion (surrounded by scholars of ancient languages) he was lucky!

Sometimes not speaking at all is to one's advantage. One fine day the English soccer club Ipswich Town (Suffolk) was to play Manchester City. The club chairman arrived very early and found a youth wearing Manchester City colours sitting outside the ground. 'Come in and look around', he said, giving the boy a conducted tour of the Portman Road stadium, including the board room, the players' dressing rooms, etc. Throughout, the young man kept his silence. At the end the chairman said: 'Well, when you go back to Manchester you can tell them how well we treated you at Ipswich'. 'Manchester?', said the lad, in a marked Ipswich accent. 'I only come from Westerfield' (a neighbouring suburb).

In Hong Kong there is a sociolinguistic taboo against using English in all-Chinese groups; this is perceived as culturally disloyal.

In some countries, issues of linguistic form are very 'hot' indeed. In Norway, for example, there are two distinct kinds of Standard Norwegian (for historical/cultural reasons), and further distinctions within each kind (conservative versus 'trendy', etc.). The choice of variety brings with it major social consequences. Once, a television weather reporter lost his job over his refusal to use the form of the word for 'snow' favoured by the station. He then became a minor celebrity under the sobriquet 'The Abominable Snowman'!

During World War II, prisoners of war often taught each other languages, to pass the time and with a view to post-war opportunities. One prisoner was very concerned to learn Russian, but the only Russian-speaker available wanted in turn to learn Chinese, and – despite being known for having lived 'out east' – the first man knew no Chinese. So he concealed this fact,

invented a language which sounded vaguely like Chinese (monosyllabic words often ending in *-ng*, huge intonation shifts, etc.) and had unusual grammar features – and passed it off as Chinese. Unfortunately, the Russian was a very good and fast language-learner! After a short time the first man was spending so much time inventing more 'Chinese' and struggling to keep two lessons ahead of his friend that he had no time left for studying Russian. The war ended and they went their separate ways. Did the Russian ever get to try out his 'Chinese', one wonders!

In Hong Kong there is a sociolinguistic taboo against using English in all-Chinese groups; this is perceived as culturally disloyal. It is thus difficult to persuade students to practise their English outside the classroom, despite the huge advantages (employment, etc.) associated with a good knowledge of the language. One of my students was unusual in actually enjoying English. She was teased by her classmates ('*Lover of the West*', '*Englishwoman*', etc.) but persisted (and later got into a good American university, partly because of her better English). She subscribed to a local English-language magazine called *I Love English*. Merely being seen with this organ would have invited disparaging comment, so she carried each newly-purchased issue around in a brown paper bag. This led one classmate to accuse her of buying pornography (very disgraceful for a Chinese girl)! She couldn't win!

More next time!

Editor's note

Another example (though what language it is mimicking is unclear):

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REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

Science Tales: Lies, Hoaxes and Scams by Darryl Cunningham, 2013. Myriad Editions, Brighton, pp 208. ISBN: 9781908434364. £11.99 hbk.

Reviewed by Dene Bebbington

Books helping to debunk bad science and spread the idea of critical thinking about science are always welcome, but perhaps mainly preach to the choir. Darryl Cunningham's *Science Tales: Lies, Hoaxes and Scams* takes a different approach to format in this 200 page comic disguised as a hardback book.

Each page typically has six pictures with an accompanying explanatory sentence or speech caption. Subjects covered include the usual science debate suspects such as evolution, climate change and homeopathy, plus some less obvious ones like electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Despite this being a comic book, with all the limitations inherent in that, there's obviously been a lot of research done on each subject, and Cunningham does a great job of distilling much detail into key points.

Four of the subjects are related to health. The chapter on Dr Andrew Wakefield and the MMR scare touches on one of the societal problems of science: that the public is often ill-served by media reporting. As Cunningham points out, the study linking the MMR vaccine to autism had a sample of only twelve children. Yet many parents were scared by media reports and the number of children having the MMR vaccine declined, resulting in an increase in measles cases.

Whereas the MMR chapter has a 'villain' in the form of Wakefield, the chapter on ECT is more like a cartoon version of a short essay. It presents the pros and cons of this form of treatment for depression, and ends with Cunningham giving his opinion.

'It seems that an emotional story combined with an investment in belief... can trump any number of scientific studies'.

Not surprisingly, the alleged moon landing hoax is discussed. I did learn something even though a few of the most well-known claims by supporters of the hoax theory are described and answered (why are there no stars in the moon photos etc.). Reference is made to an experiment in the *Mythbusters* TV show, where the presenters tried to replicate the moonwalk on Earth using harnesses and filming at a higher frame rate than normal. This exemplifies the difference between armchair conspiracy theorists who try to pick apart events such as the moon landing even if they lack expertise, and the sceptics who actually do experiments.

The chapter on evolution differs from many sceptic book treatments in that it doesn't address Creationism or Intelligent Design directly. Instead it gives a crash course in the main tenets

of evolution.

Other subjects include fracking and climate change. In the final chapter – titled 'Science Denial' – Cunningham hits the nail on the head when he says that 'It seems that an emotional story combined with an investment in belief... can trump any number of scientific studies'. That's why Joe Public doesn't argue about whether string theory in physics is true – because it doesn't affect him. What might affect him is a cherished religious belief or other worldview, and that's why evolution and climate change in particular generate vociferous public debate.

Science Tales is a book to feel ambivalent about because the content is good but there's not a lot of it. If this were an actual comic and priced accordingly I'd recommend it as an introduction to the subjects it covers – it'd be ideal for teenagers to try and spark an interest in critical thinking and scepticism. But with a cover price of £11.99 and taking less than two hours to read it's poor value for money. That money would be better spent on Carl Sagan's *The Demon-Haunted World* or Richard Dawkins' *Unweaving the Rainbow*.

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How not to do Linguistics

A review by Mark Newbrook

Instead of (or as well as) offering specific non-standard claims about specific languages or specific aspects of languages, some non-mainstream thinkers propose non-standard, often

bizarre theories and methodologies involving language in general or major aspects of language(s). These theories are rivals to the various general theories current in the mainstream of

linguistics, and are often in sharp contrast with all such mainstream theories (and with each other). I have discussed some such theories in earlier works in this forum; for those

involving historical linguistics, see now also Chapters 1-4 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* (Lincom-Europa, Munich). The writers who discuss **non**-historical issues in this vein include postmodernist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida with their focus upon written language at the expense of spoken, John Trotter, Owen Barfield, Brian Josephson & David Blair, David Wynn-Miller, and John Latham; on these authors, see now Chapter 10 of my book.

Another author of this kind is Mick Harper, who presents some astounding and inadequately supported views regarding the history of English (and of other European languages). See *The History of Britain Revealed: The Shocking Truth about the English Language*, 2nd edn, London, 2007; for comment, see Mark Newbrook and Sarah Thomason, Review of Harper, M.J., *The History Of England Revealed* (2002), *The Skeptical Intelligencer*, 7 (2005), pp. 34-36; Mark Newbrook and Sarah Thomason, Comments on Harper's reply to Review of Harper, M.J. (2002), *The Skeptical Intelligencer*, 8 (2005/2006), pp. 38-39; and now pp. 60-61 of *Strange Linguistics*. More relevantly here, Harper also proclaims, by way of methodological background to these ideas, a supposedly novel research methodology for historical linguistics and indeed for the humanities generally, which he titles 'Applied Epistemology'. He seems to have developed this notion in response to what he perceives as sloppy and tendentious reasoning on the part of mainstream linguists, historians etc. In his view, the errors in question are often so basic and so damaging that a new 'paradigm' of research is required, much more securely grounded in logic and the theory of knowledge.

Harper's treatment of these matters is less than persuasive. The most that can be said in his favour is that he occasionally spots a weak or inadequately explicit piece of argumentation in mainstream work. But this is not a sufficient basis for erecting (or purporting to erect) an

entire novel methodology. And indeed Harper's 'Applied Epistemology' does not appear significantly different from the methods actually used in the mainstream, where the philosophical background issues are already very familiar. Harper rejects mainstream scholars' **conclusions** – but he offers little valid criticism of the methods used to reach them. In addition, Harper himself argues weakly and tendentiously in various places (sometimes also displaying inadequate knowledge of the facts); he often treats the evidence and reasoning against mainstream views and in support of his own as much stronger than they actually appear to be.

Harper rejects mainstream scholars' conclusions – but he offers little valid criticism of the methods used to reach them.

Recently, in this forum, I reviewed the 2013 book *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Decipherment Revealed: A Revisionist Model of Egyptian Decipherment Showing Evidence that the Ancient Egyptian Language and the Ancient Hebrew Language are Closely Related*, by David Leonardi. In Chapter 7 of this book (pp. 71-77) and the early sections of Chapter 8 (pp. 78-82), Leonardi presents his idiosyncratic ideas about morphology (the structure of complex words each including more than one morpheme = 'meaningful component') as applied to Egyptian and Hebrew and also – and more relevantly here – as applied to languages generally. Following up his earlier published work (and his correspondence with me over the last decade), he introduces here an obscure and unnecessary system of novel morphological terms. Leonardi regards himself as knowledgeable about historical linguistics, and he even runs a bulletin-board misleadingly called simply Historical Linguistics which promotes his idiosyncratic ideas.

It has to be said at the outset that Leonardi's approach, exposition and use of terminology, in this book as in

his earlier work, are difficult to understand. His use of linguistic terminology is idiosyncratic and obscure, and more generally his wording is often strange. These faults are well exemplified in this section of his book. To exemplify: in his wording, at least, Leonardi repeatedly confuses synchronic (non-historical) and diachronic (historical) issues (as he does elsewhere) – despite announcing on p. 72 that his focus **here** is on synchronic issues only, at least as far as Egyptian and Hebrew are concerned. Specifically, he badly hinders his own exposition of such matters by loosely using the diachronic term *change* to refer also to synchronic alternation as in English *wife* versus *wive[s]* (this is an instance of what a PhD supervisor would castigate as 'undergraduate' usage).

Further, Leonardi uses the term *derivation* with a broad 'popular' meaning involving various kinds of synchronic and diachronic relationship between the forms of related words and/or the varied and shifting meanings of one word or of a set of related words (see below for examples). In fact, this term has a specific technical sense in linguistics, involving the (synchronic or diachronic) morphological relationships of form between distinct words – belonging to the same or to different 'parts of speech' – which share a stem, as exemplified by connected English verb-noun pairs such as *condemn* and *condemnation* (it contrasts here with the term *inflection*, referring to grammatically distinct forms of the **same** word, as in the verb *condemn* and its past tense form *condemned*).

Perhaps because of failure to appreciate this, Leonardi seems to confuse etymology considered generally (which is a diachronic matter and is **occasionally** and **informally** referred to by linguists as *derivation*) with the more specific issue of (synchronic or diachronic) matters of derivational morphology in the technical sense of *derivation* as just explained. In particular, Leonardi's decision to include under 'derivation'

purely **semantic** differences and changes (those which involve only 'lexical' meaning [see below], **not** any difference of or change in the **form** of a word) is very strange and confusing. On p. 73 he even implies that in what he calls 'morphological derivation' there is **always** [a 'change' of] meaning associated with the 'change' in form (see above; does he intend the term *change* to be understood here synchronically, diachronically or both?). But, although **most** derivational phenomena (in the narrow, technical sense of the term) **do** involve differences of (grammatical) meaning, there **are** counter-examples, involving pairs such as English *orient* and *orientate* (both verbs, same sense). And Leonardi himself includes as derivational some 'familial' derivations (see below) involving no change of meaning. His discussion of these matters appears utterly confused.

Leonardi's use of some key specific expressions, such as *in theory* (for example on pp. 71 and 72), is also obscure – disastrously so, in context.

Another problem with Leonardi's exposition involves his tendency to focus upon spelling and written forms rather than on phonology/pronunciation (which is, obviously, conceptually prior). On p. 71, when defining his term *familial* (see below), his references fluctuate between spoken and written forms; but on p. 73 he goes so far as to declare that if a word undergoes only a 'change' (see again above; does he intend this term to be understood synchronically, diachronically or both?) in pronunciation (i.e. not in spelling) then that change does not qualify as a 'morphological derivation'. But the relationships between spoken and written forms in each language are historically complex; and there is no good reason to exclude differently-pronounced forms from the concept of 'derivation' merely because they are spelled the same (consider pairs of forms such as the English noun and verb both spelled *permit* and derivationally related but pronounced differently). This confusion on

Leonardi's part is partly the result of sheer linguistic naivety and partly associated with his idiosyncratic non-standard belief that God simultaneously created spoken and written Hebrew and that in early Hebrew, at least, letters and phonemes can therefore be equated.

Leonardi's account also displays various outright inaccuracies. For example, he commences Chapter 7 with the blatantly false (and confusingly supported) statement that 'the field of Historical Linguistics lacks terminology to describe types of word derivations' (p. 71); it appears that he is not sufficiently familiar with the linguistic literature or has failed to understand it. And indeed – as in his earlier work – Leonardi misinterprets the statements of mainstream linguists such as P.H. Matthews (cited – without a full reference – on p. 79) about these matters (though he refuses to accept correction on this front); and in places he attacks 'mainstream' straw men.

It appears that he (Leonardi) is not sufficiently familiar with the linguistic literature or has failed to understand it.

Another set of mistakes involves Leonardi's decision to treat as etymologically related various pairs or sets of words which either are known to be **unrelated** or have uncertain etymologies. This is often connected with his belief that many words in many languages have unacknowledged Hebrew origins. Examples include English *plot* and *plate*, cited together on p. 71, and his tracing (p. 74) of English *court* to English *core* and ultimately to Hebrew *sor* ('court'). There are also sheer errors of fact regarding word-meanings (for example that of the Latin word *posterior*; see p. 72).

Apparently thinking here of 'derivation' in his loose sense, Leonardi introduces some general issues which are only marginally relevant to the narrower technical notion of 'derivation': (a) the transfer

of words and of some of their phonemes from one language (or 'dialect'; he confusingly refers in this context to 'dialect group[s]') to another, described here as *filtered derivation* (p. 73), (b) the phenomenon of words taking on new meanings through originally metaphorical use (Leonardi calls this phenomenon **analog derivation** and is careful to distinguish this notion from that of analogy, on which see (c) below) (p. 74), (c) the reanalysis of the morphology of transferred words by way of analogy (p. 75), (d) the obscuring of background morphological facts over time within one language (p. 75), and (e) the development of words based on onomatopoeia or sound-symbolism (p. 75; also Chapter 8). His comments on all these matters are largely valid in themselves, although some of the last body of material (e) relates to his own non-mainstream views about the origins of Hebrew phonemes and letters.

Leonardi's own novel morphological terms include:

Familial (pp. 71ff)

In these cases, one word is said to be 'derived' from another (within one language or cross-linguistically; see p. 76) by way of an unsystematic difference of form and an associated unpredictable difference of meaning. It is suggested (p. 77) that some cases of this kind can involve compounded sequences of two or more stems with distinct, linked meanings; but Leonardi's main examples involve single stems with simple senses. Leonardi states that 'in theory' there are no examples of familial derivation in Hebrew or Egyptian, because their morphologies are highly systematic. But his examples from other languages (such as English *plot* and *plate* as discussed above) are typically wrong or at any rate unsupported; and in any event this would involve derivation only in Leonardi's looser sense of the term. In addition, Leonardi confusingly states (p. 73) that some familial derivations involve **no** change of meaning. Overall, it is not at all clear

that a new term is needed here, still less that *familial* would be the best term (Leonardi justifies it as referring to ‘families’ of words, an unhelpfully loose concept, subject (like his version of the notion ‘paradigm’) to multiple interpretations).

Associative (pp. 72ff)

In these cases, the same form is said to have taken on (slightly) different meanings in different contexts (within one language or cross-linguistically). Leonardi’s specific example (involving Latin and English uses of *posterior*) is wrong (as noted above), but the point is made. Now in the technical sense of ‘derivation’ it is perfectly possible for some pairs of derivationally-linked words to have the very same forms, in writing (see above on *permit* and *permit*), pronunciation or both (consider noun-verb pairs such as English *book* and *book* = ‘make a reservation [in a book]’). But the (main) differences of meaning between the members of such pairs are, obviously, grammatical. In contrast, Leonardi (obviously thinking only of ‘derivation’ in his loose sense) is speaking here of (diachronic) shifts of meaning at **word-level** (‘lexical’ as opposed to grammatical meaning).

After reading this section one still has no real idea as to what the novel term *lexiform* is supposed to mean!

Lexiform (pp. 72ff)

Cases of this kind are said to be especially numerous in Hebrew and Egyptian as reinterpreted by Leonardi. In these cases, two or more word-stems (lexical morphemes) combine to form what traditional grammarians and many modern linguists have called *compound words*, as in *blackbird* or *antifascist* (this is derivation in the technical sense). Leonardi acknowledges this usage (see below) but also states that linguists have used the term *complex word* in this context. This latter is false; he has misunderstood the literature. Complex words are in fact those which include

at least one lexical morpheme **and** at least one grammatical morpheme, as in derivation in the technical sense or inflection. Leonardi rejects the ‘straw-man’ position he has erected on the grounds that it fails to allow for the later development of the words in question (originally sequences of two or more lexical stems with distinct, linked meanings) into simple words seen as having single meanings – a phenomenon used on p. 75 to exemplify his point identified above as point (d) (the specific example used is English *magpie*). But this objection appears irrelevant in any case: the initial (synchronic) compound nature of such words is one thing, and the subsequent (diachronic) loss of their internal morpheme boundaries (etc.) – and their later ensuing (synchronic) single-morpheme status – is another. Leonardi is again, it seems, confusing synchronic and diachronic issues (and berating linguists for **not** thinking in this confused way!). He goes on to suggest (again wrongly, as it seems) that the term *compound* is more commonly used (by linguists?) for cases which are ‘semantically disjoint’, giving two obscure English compound words as examples of this pattern but failing to **explain** his possibly idiosyncratic use of the term *disjoint*. He then suggests (correctly) that some linguists use the term *compound* more widely to include all ‘lexiform’ cases and (obscurely) that they thus fail to distinguish ‘semantically singular’ and semantically disjoint words (the reader still does not know what either of these terms means). And he concludes this section by redefining his term *lexiform* in quite other terms, as involving ‘changes’ (synchronic or diachronic?) of phonemes resulting in new meanings and as contrasting in this respect with ‘familial’ derivations which (here only) are said to involve **no** meaning change (see above). After reading this section one still has no real idea as to what the novel term *lexiform* is supposed to mean!

Inflectional (pp. 73ff)

This term is itself mainstream (see above), but it does not actually involve

derivation in the technical sense. Leonardi’s own discussion of the relevant ideas again manifests large amounts of confusion and error. First: he correctly states that inflections (‘inflectional derivations’) are grammatical; but so are derivations in the technical sense. Second: some of Leonardi’s examples here actually involve derivation, **not** inflection (for example, the English noun *cooker* vs the verb *cook*), or else cases which are ‘borderline’ and/or ambiguous in this respect (such as *cooking*). Third: Leonardi, correctly indicating that inflectional differences involve different forms of the same **lexeme** (‘dictionary word’), defines this latter concept in terms of the ‘bases’ (‘stems’?) of the (complex) words in question being ‘semantically exactly the same’ (having the same meaning). This is correct in itself but not restrictive enough: (i) the very same is true of derivational differences, and (ii) the stems must also be the same in **form**, or at least recognisably closely related, to count as the same lexeme (the stems *abattoir* and *slaughterhouse* have the same meaning but they do not represent the same lexeme). Fourth: Leonardi sets up another straw man by claiming that some linguists treat the English verb-forms *left* and *went* as inflectionally related; in fact, all linguists would agree with him in identifying *went* as inflectionally linked with *go* (as a highly ‘irregular’ past tense form). (The morphological and semantic history of *go* and *went* is actually very interesting, but I cannot deal with it here.) And the obscure final sentence of this section wrongly invokes (as it seems) ‘the point of view of the speaker’ and the sociolinguistic process of standardisation.

Leonardi completes this chapter with a summary (pp. 76-77) which includes further references to his own idiosyncratic views and serves mainly to add to the overall confusion.

When I first read Chapter 7 of Leonardi’s book I thought it badly confused; but the more I looked at it in the course of preparing this review, the more confusion, error, poor wording

etc. I found. If Leonardi has anything worthwhile to say about these general matters (as opposed to his strange ideas about Hebrew and Egyptian specifically), it is deeply buried beneath his errors, his perversely obscure 'technical' usage and his chaotic exposition. One must suspect that in fact he has not. But in any case I

hope it will be clear even to non-specialists that the material discussed here, and Leonardi's material in particular, exemplifies 'how not to do linguistics'. This would be much less alarming if people like Leonardi did not have any influence upon others. Unfortunately, the circulation of books such as his, and the availability of

associated online material, may afford such authors (who may 'come across' to the untutored as if they know the discipline) the opportunity to exert some such unwarranted influence. I hope that my comments here will go some way towards counteracting such effects.

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.

The 16th European Skeptics Congress

See the announcement on the cover of this issue. Keep an eye on the congress website:

<http://eurocepticscon.org/>

OF INTEREST

SCEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Be sure to keep visiting the Ask for Evidence webpage and report on your own efforts when you have Asked for Evidence. At:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/a4e.html>

Do you have or know of a journal club, discussion group, departmental dinner, youth club, WI group ... any event that might benefit from a short, fun and engaging Ask for Evidence talk? Contact:

mgoldman@senseaboutscience.org

For information on how to make a donation to the Ask for Evidence Campaign go to:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/donate.html>

The Ask for Evidence Campaign has been featured as the 'Campaign of the Week' on Mumsnet.

http://www.mumsnet.com/campaigns/links-to-other-organisations?utm_source=External&utm_medium=Link&utm_campaign=AskforEvidence

Evidence-based policy

A multi-centre project on evidence-based policy has been launched in the *Guardian* by Cardiff University, the University of Exeter, and University College London. 'This project aims to develop a new mechanism called the Evidence Information Service (EIS) to facilitate rapid communication between the political community and research professionals in academia and industry. In advance of commencing this service the team are calling for Local Champions, members of the public to interview their local politicians about evidence use. The outcome of these interviews will help determine the shape of the EIS. Since the initiative has been launched there has been a really positive response but many constituencies across the UK are yet to

be represented. If you would consider being a Local Champion, please contact eis@cardiff.ac.uk for more information.'

Main launch article:

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/mar/18/research-scientific-evidence-information-service-politicians-eis>

Q&A about the Evidence Information Service:

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2014/mar/18/evidence-information-service-uk-politicians>

Another website of skeptical interest

'Science enriches human life by providing a deeper, more intuitive understanding of the world around us. The goal of *Cerebretorium* is to help promote, spread and foster an increased scientific literacy within the general populace. Our primary focus is on the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, biology). Engineering, mathematics

and computer science are also covered. This is an open forum for the free exchange of ideas. Interesting and relevant posts from fans are encouraged and always welcomed’.

<https://www.facebook.com/cerebretorium/info>

False balance in reporting science
BBC report on impartiality and balance in science reporting.

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/science_impartiality/trust_conclusions.pdf

SCIENTIFIC TOPICS

The ‘supermoon’ (or not)

The year’s biggest ‘supermoon’ rose on August 10. But was it so much hype?

<http://theconversation.com/big-moon-rising-go-and-have-a-look-but-dont-be-fooled-into-thinking-its-all-that-super-29227>

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. Recent activity concerns acupuncture.

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

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

Statins for all

‘The UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has issued new guidelines on lipid lowering.....This guidance, authored by a small group of important cholesterol specialists, is surely a scientific and thought-through analysis of the research data. Shouldn’t we embrace such authoritative advice?’

‘The guidelines rely on a simplistic model of the cause of ischaemic heart disease, assuming that its decline is merely the result of a reduction in risk factors and better medical management. But the decline in vascular disease predates medical

treatment, and the data are riddled with unexplained paradoxes. There is more to vascular disease than lipids, hypertension, and the rest.’

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g1899>

(by subscription)

Vaccination

‘Wealthy L.A. schools’ vaccination rates are as low as South Sudan’s. Hollywood parents say not vaccinating makes “instinctive” sense. Now their kids have whooping cough.’

<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/wealthy-la-schools-vaccination-rates-are-as-low-as-south-sudans/380252/>

Ebola

Millionaire Nigerian faith healer T.B. Joshua has reportedly sent 4,000 bottles of his holy water to Sierra Leone, as part of an aid package. He claims that the water can cure many diseases including ebola.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/millionaire-preacher-sends-4000-bottles-of-holy-water-as-ebola-cure-9674136.html>

‘The heart of a cobra and the eyeball of a porcupine — along with a payment of £200 — can cure ebola, according to a witchdoctor working the West African region hit by the epidemic’.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/africa/article4221572.ece>

RELIGION

Possession and exorcism

Interview with Chris French for ‘Monster Talk’:

<http://www.skeptic.com/podcasts/monstertalk/14/07/16/>

Article by Chris French in the *Guardian*:

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/jul/09/pope-francis-psychology-exorcism-possession>

Scientology

‘The Church of Scientology, famous for its Hollywood celebrity followers, once hailed its new home in north-east England as a centre for spiritual enlightenment. Several years on, the building lies empty and is a haven for squatters and drug users.’

The same article reports that at the last census there were 2,418 Scientologists in England and Wales. This is slightly more than the number of Satanists, but many fewer than those claiming to be Jedi Knights.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-26936135>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

A psychic challenge

In 1994 Stuart Landsborough, a member of the New Zealand Skeptics Society, created a challenge to test those who claim to deal in the paranormal:

Psychics – we challenge you to use psychic means to find two halves of a promissory note hidden within 100 metres of the Challenge display at Puzzling World, New Zealand. Each official challenger will have to pay a fee of NZ\$1,000. If the challenger fails, this money will be given to charity.

Since 1994, five people who claim to have psychic ability have accepted the challenge. All have failed. Stuart has just done a press release commemorating the 20 years that his challenge has been running.

www.psychicchallenge.co.nz

The great UFO ‘cover-up’

‘In a new documentary, US government agents claim they spent decades giving fake evidence of extraterrestrials to gullible ufologists.’

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/14/men-in-black-ufo-sightings-mirage-makers-movie>

Electronic noise phenomena

Jolyon Jenkins reports on the world of electronic voice phenomena (EVP) - the community of people who believe that the dead can speak to us through radio transmissions and white noise.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01rg1gh>

Ghosts

Programme on Ghosts on the BBC World Service available to download here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p024dzql>

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 Professor Stuart Hall Building (formerly 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 UK

<http://centreforinquiry.org.uk/>

Saturday 18 October 2014

Vampire, werewolves and witches: the myth and the reality

Presented by the Centre for Inquiry UK and Conway Hall Ethical Society

Venue: Conway Hall, London

CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

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

QUAD

Market Place, Cathedral Quarter,
Derby DE1 3AS

'Quad is a cinema, gallery, café bar and workshop that anyone can use.'

20 September to 23 November 2014:

An Answer is Expected

'An Answer is Expected' is a body of sculpture and video work that considers the historic and groundbreaking experimental ESP (*Extra Sensory Perception*) and telepathy work of parapsychologist Dr JB Rhine. With a fascination in the researcher's quest for answers and proof Susan MacWilliam reflects on the work, experimental apparatus, lives and personalities of those involved in parapsychology – a subject falling beyond the 'normal' fields of science and psychology. - See more at:

<http://www.derbyquad.co.uk/exhibition/susan-macwilliam-answer-expected#sthash.v92Z14sR.dpuf>

Wednesday 22 October at 7:00p.m.

Join in a conversation between Susan MacWilliam, and curator and writer Camilla Brown. See more at:

<http://www.derbyquad.co.uk/exhibition/susan-macwilliam-conversation#sthash.Jpv223KJ.dpuf>

Saturday 15th November, 7:00-8:30 p.m.

The Ex-Files: Supernatural Space Mysteries Explored

'Join Anthony Southwell as he takes a look at the mysterious side of Astronomy and Space Exploration. Anthony will be looking at Extra-Sensory Perception (ESP) experiments undertaken on an Apollo lunar mission by Astronaut Edgar Mitchell, and what was the object that 'followed' Apollo 11 as it headed for the Moon? What is the 'Face' on Mars that was discovered by the Viking 1 orbiter in 1976?

Strange radio signals being received from Space, natural radio sources or aliens saying 'Hello'? And on Earth, the myths surrounding the Pyramids, and what are those strange lines and drawings on the plains of Nazca, Peru for, and what do they mean? Finally, Anthony will take a quick look at Astrology, can you tell a person's future from the stars? Let an Astronomer set the record straight on this one. Even though these subjects are strange, and appear to be a bit of an enigma, Anthony will show that these events do have a logical, and quite simple, explanation.' Anthony is Secretary of the Derby and District Astronomical Society. See more at:

<http://www.derbyquad.co.uk/exhibition/ex-files-supernatural-space-mysteries-explored#sthash.aVZvkvkO.dpuf>

Wednesday 19th November

7:00p.m. Why do we believe in the supernatural?

'The supernatural is an area that has been studied by many different disciplines. This talk will present two such views in a debate between Dr. Andrew Wilson Head of Sociology and Dr. Ian Baker senior lecturer in Psychology, both from the University of Derby. Rather than debating the existence of supernatural phenomena, this debate will attempt to explain what makes supernatural belief so popular. This debate will be chaired by Malcolm Schofield, a PhD student at the University of Derby, who will keep it a fair fight and take questions and comments from the audience.' See more at:

<http://www.derbyquad.co.uk/exhibition/why-do-we-believe-supernatural#sthash.QMluPKtl.dpuf>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

Answer

Albert was right in the first place – he lost £10. The error everyone else is committing is to make a financial connection between the purchase of the chocolate and Albert's having to refund the florist £10 for the forged note. Financially he would be no worse off if there had been no forgery but he

had unknowingly dropped £10 in the street.

To be confident of this answer I consulted a friend who is an accountant. His reply was as follows:

My logic is that in financial terms the stranger's profit must equal Albert's loss. The stranger makes a £10 profit because, having offered nothing (a

dodgy £10 note), he acquires £6 of chocolate and £4 of real money. All lines after that are irrelevant. The £4 cash paid out would have been paid out anyway. All other costs (opportunity costs) are irrelevant because Albert could buy and sell more chocolates at the original price.

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:

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